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# IMAGINATION

SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER, 1957  
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**FUGITIVE  
OF THE STARS**

by  
Edmond Hamilton



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# The Editorial

Time was (and not so long ago at that) when a young science fiction reader (such as ourself) had difficulty in scrounging up the necessary coin of the realm to secure the latest issue of a favorite s-f mag from the local newsstand. And in those days (the thirties) you could pick one up for 20c a throw—an exorbitant price considering that most other fiction magazines were going for a dime. That 20c sure looked big. But then, we were just crawling out of the black well of a depression and anything bigger than a penny made you rich.

Times have changed. And thankfully. Today the young science fiction reader is rodding around in his own car. He either gets a sizable allowance—up to a sawbuck a week—or has a part-time job which nets him up to fifty skins per. There's the comfortable and comforting feel of paper in his pocket, and we don't mean kleenex.

Why do we mention this? Simple. The youthful s-f follower today has a great many opportunities that we pioneers (hah, at thirty-six yet!) of yesteryear never had. We recall looking enviously up at the Moon on a clear night. We'd have given our eyeteeth to be able to see it a little better. More aptly, a little bigger. For the Moon, after all, will be the first objective of

science fiction come to life—space flight. What we wouldn't have given to own a telescope. Not a big one. Even a vest pocket model! But heck, we had trouble scrounging that 20c we mentioned earlier. Not for us.

Not so today. We know a number of young s-f fans—typical of our modern economic improvement—who are (or already have in some cases) buying a telescope. Not a vest pocket model. Not our speed in the old days, thank you. Nope. Real backyard affair. Tripod. Stands four to six feet off the ground. Finely ground German lenses. Big power. BIG power.

The cost? Not as bad as you'd think—by current standards. Less than a hundred skins. Duck soup for the modern generation. A couple of weeks pay from that part-time job. And we're all for it. Well spent money. Better than blowing it in the local drive-ins.

How about you? Got your telescope yet? Taken a really *good* look at old Luna? If not you've got a thrill in store. So hop down to the nearest and plunk that green stuff on the line. It's money you won't miss considering the value received. You're lucky to be able to afford such luxury! . . . Oh yes, don't spend it all—save 35c for our next issue. That's *our* luxury! . . . . . wllh

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# FUGITIVE OF THE STARS

*By Edmond Hamilton*

**Many had died in the space wreck, and Jim Horne was being tracked down as a murderer. His escape meant freedom — and a galactic holocaust!**

A GREAT SINUOUS shining arm reached out of the black water directly ahead of the skiff. Jim Horne slammed the steering lever hard over with one hand

and reached for his gun with the other. The little bullet-shaped craft shot off on a frantic tangent, drawing swirls of cold fire from under its metalloy hull. Horne





aimed at the coiling arm and made more fire in the night, this time red and hot.

Where the blast hit it a portion of the arm shrivelled into ash and was gone. The rest of it continued its lazy motion without any sign of disturbance. Horne began to laugh. It was only a long thick coil of phosphorescent weed, given a semblance of life by the rolling of the whole bed in some hidden undercurrent.

The laughter became rather too loud, ringing with a shocking loneliness across the empty sea. Horne stopped it. He couldn't let himself get edgy now. He had come a long way and a brutal hard one, but he had a longer and harder way yet to go, to the city of Rillah in search of a ghost.

"Maybe," he muttered to himself, "I better get some sleep."

He was sweating and shaking in a way that alarmed him. He pulled back on the speed lever until the skiff was moving at a safe rate of speed. Its radar beam would take it around rocks or islands of floating weed too thick for passage, bringing it back to the course he had set. The night would go on for a long time yet, for the space of two or three Earth days.

He lay down in the narrow well and slid the plastic canopy over him in case it rained. Rain on

Skereth was not merely a matter of getting wet. A shower could swamp the skiff before he had time to wake up.

He lay still, feeling the quiet lift and fall of the black water like the breathing of a slumbrous giant. He was exhausted, burned out inside by the intensity that life had taken on for him in the last four months.

Ever since the wreck of the Federation packet *Vega Queen*, run head on to destruction in a meteor swarm off Arcturus III, while in deceleration pattern preparatory to landing. There were only four known survivors. Thirty-seven others, men in the Federation civil or consular service, a few envoys from non-Fed worlds like Skereth, and their wives and families, had perished.

The Chief Pilot, they said, was at fault. The Chief Pilot had set a course that made no allowance for the meteor swarm, although it was periodic and fully charted. The Chief Pilot had then got himself dead drunk, leaving the handling of the ship to an inexperienced junior pilot. When he was finally hauled from his bunk and dragged to the cockpit it was too late.

That's what they said, the three other survivors and the Board of Inquiry. The Board recommended a full trial, with very stern penal-

ties in the inevitable event of conviction.

Only Jim Horne was doubtful. Jim Horne was the fourth survivor. He was also the Chief Pilot.

There was very much about the wreck that he did not remember, both before and after. But two things he did remember very well. One, the decel course he had set took full account of the meteor swarm. Two, he had not had anything to drink but his customary after-dinner brandy.

No records survived to back this up. The junior pilot, Ardrick, junior to Horne in service seniority rather than in years and far from a novice where space was concerned, having been since boyhood in the merchant fleet of his home world, might have been able to give a lot of information, but he was not one of the survivors.

The idea kept nagging at Jim Horne that in spite of that Ardrick was not dead at all.

In a wreck like that you could not expect to find all the bodies, even fragmented, and there was no way of telling whether one of the lifeboats was gone or simply disintegrated. So you could only go by hunch and hope and the unshakable fact of memory. You had not done the things you were said to have done, so somebody was lying. Somebody had altered the

course and drugged the brandy and left you to explain if you could why thirty-seven people rushed helplessly toward death while you were snoring in your bunk.

Ardric was the man with the opportunity. Horne thought he might also be the man with the motive. Ardrick was from Skereth, and there had been a VIP from Skereth aboard the ship. His name was Morivenn and he was on his way to Vega Center to discuss the possibility of bringing the planet into the Federation. Ardrick had never talked politics. But federation was a hot and burning issue on Skereth, and immediately following the death of the VIP in the wreck the anti-Fed party back home had surged into power.

Horne did not blame the Board very much for not taking his ideas on this too seriously. He had to admit himself that it sounded like a cock-and-bull story designed to saddle the blame for his own criminal negligence on the innocent shoulders of one of his victims. But it was the only explanation he could think of.

As Horne saw it, he had no alternative. If he stayed and stood his trial he was certain of conviction, disgrace and imprisonment. So he jumped his bail, eluded the watchful authorities on Vega, and made it to Skereth by such devious

ways as only a veteran spaceman could manage, hunting a dead man.

He was still hunting him, and there was no more evidence now than there had been before that Ardric was alive. And Skereth was a big, strange, proud and hostile world. And Horne was very, very tired.

HE LAY STARING up at the sky through the transparent canopy, waiting for sleep, and he noticed what he thought was a dim star, low and far off in the west.

"The clouds must have broken," he thought, and closed his eyes. The skiff moved gently over the breathing sea.

Broken clouds, a star, and tomorrow morning the sun would shine . . .

Horne started up, flinging back the canopy.

On Skereth, once in a lifetime a man may see the sun or catch a glimpse of the stars. Otherwise he lives behind a wall of eternal cloud, and takes the universe beyond on faith. Some people said that that peculiarity of nature explained the whole psychology of Skereth.

Whatever the light was in the sky, it was not a star.

It was still there, but brighter, and as he watched it now he could see that it moved back and forth

as well as forward. It reminded him of a man with a flashlight walking in a dark place, looking for something.

Looking for something.

He watched it, crouched over the controls of the skiff. His heart was beating hard again and his hands quivered.

Back and forth the light went, coming closer, sweeping the dark sea.

Looking for something.

Looking for him.

He was not surprised. Somebody at Vega would have remembered his talk about Ardric and Skereth. And for a man like himself, running from the kind of indictment he had against him, the Federation police would have no difficulty in making arrangements with the local authorities for pursuit.

No difficulty at all, especially if he was right and thirty-six other people had been sacrificed, with or without regret, to the necessity of eliminating one man. The local authorities would be only too happy to make sure he had no chance to ask dangerous questions at his trial.

The light moved, unhurried, methodical, relentless.

He started to push the speed lever forward and then changed his mind. The damned phosphorescence would give him away if

he made a wake. From the sky it would show like a fiery arrow pointing right at him. Even the gentle way he had on now was too much. He shoved the lever into the off slot and stood looking desperately around, wondering what to do. If he stayed drifting where he was, eventually the sweeping light would catch him in its beam and the men behind it would either take him back to be tried or shoot him dead, probably the latter. He had to hide. But where in the open sea did you hide?

A weed island if you could find one and if you could get there in time.

He peered and squinted into the night.

A smear of luminescence showed, soft and faint to his left, too high to be merely a surface patch. He glanced again at the light and then he began feverishly to strip to his shirt and shorts. His feet were already bare. There was a plastic mooring line reeled up forward for use where no magnetic moorings were available. He tied the end of it around his waist and slid over the side, trying not to splash.

The water was warm. It was calm, but with the great slow pulsing aliveness of the sea that is never quite still. It was very wide and black and there were creatures

in it as hideous and hungry as any in the oceans of Earth. Horne swam slowly, with infinite care, towing the skiff behind him, moving his head constantly from side to side looking for tell-tale gleams.

Behind him the light searched, closer and closer.

He swam faster, toward the pale glow ahead of him.

Cold slippery tentacles of weed came fingering his bare flesh. He shrank from it but there was no other way, so he forced himself on into the mass that grew thicker and thicker as he went until he could almost stand in it, and by now the high-growing fronds curved over his head like trees, so that he moved in a tangled tracery of soft light, leaf, stem and branch all glowing silver against the blackness of sea and sky.

He could no longer see the searching presence in the sky. The mat of weed was slimy but solid under foot. He braced himself and pulled on the skiff until it was well in under the tree-like fronds. Then he climbed hastily back in, shuddering with revulsion from the touch of the weed. He began to pull streamers of the stuff over the metal hull and over the partly closed canopy so that no tell-tale glint would give him away. Then he hunched up as in a cave surrounded by the silver-glowing weed,

and waited.

There was a kind of lazy whistling in the sky now. He could not see the craft but he figured it was probably one of the flying cones widely used on Skereth. Their scientists had learned to control the G-particle in the nucleus of the iron atom some time before the scientists of Earth had even discovered its existence. Levitation on Skereth was customarily by anti-grav propulsion by compressed air or jet. This one sounded like a compressed air unit for low-velocity flight.

The soft luminescence of the weed was blanked out by a harsher and more brilliant light. It moved with agonizing slowness across the floating island, seeking, probing.

Horne drew his head down between his shoulders, as though that would help.

Through the open end of the canopy, looking over the stern, Horne could see the weed now as an ugly tangle of pallid wormy stems and flabby leaves, all its fairy-like beauty destroyed by the pitiless light. And he saw something else.

Something large and wetly glistening and independently alive.

## CHAPTER II

**H**ORNE FROZE where he crouched, one hand out-

stretched to touch the gun laid ready beside him but not picking it up.

The large glistening thing flowed and contracted, flowed and contracted, moving with a kind of single-minded determination that was horrible to watch. All Horne's boyhood nightmares returned to him full-fledged. Long ago and far away on Earth he had lived beside the sandy southern beaches, loving the sea but wondering why it had to spawn such disgustingness in its splendid depths. Now the ultimate in that line was lapping steadily toward him, and the damned cone hovered overhead sweeping its searchlight back and forth, suspicious of the island which was the only place where a man might hide a stolen skiff, and himself.

Horne sat, trapped.

He didn't dare to shoot at the thing or make any undue disturbance in the weed fighting it off.

He did not dare to let it get into the skiff with him, either.

The light penetrated through his camouflage of weed fronds and lit up the inside of the skiff so that he felt as though everybody in the universe could see him. He swore at it under his breath, muttering, "Go on, can't you? Go on!" He drew himself together, flinching from the momentarily expected blast of destruction from above,

and staring hollow-eyed at the hungry creature that was only interested in getting its dinner, flowing at him over the wet weed. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer. He slid the canopy the rest of the way shut, nipping a rubbery gelatinous edge that was already flapping over the stern. It was a very small movement. If they saw it overhead they would have to see it, that was all.

Apparently they did not. The light filtering into the skiff got dimmer. At first he thought it was all because the sea-thing was climbing up over the top of the canopy. But then he realized that the cone had moved on. The whistling of its propulsion unit became more distant, fading slowly as the cone continued its sweeping operation out over the sea again. He picked up the gun and waited, feeling the stern sink a little with the dragging weight, watching the underside of the creature slide up over the plastic and hoping the canopy would hold.

When the weed was all gleaming silver again and the sound of the cone was quite gone Horne did several things with almost hysterical swiftness. He wrenched the canopy back one inch and jammed the gun barrel through the crack and fired directly into the creature. At the same time, with his free

hand, he punched the firing-key that started the skiff's small jet. It flared into the thing lower down.

The creature began a slow, enormous flopping that shook the weed island and threw the skiff around so violently that Horne was tumbled with bone-cracking force against the side, where he managed to hang on. After a few minutes the motion subsided and he looked up and saw that the canopy was clear. The shaking of the weed had stopped outside. He shut off the jet and peered cautiously over the stern, pushing the canopy back. There was a nasty smell on the air. The pale luminescence showed him a blackened lump of stuff that was still quivering slightly. He conquered a tendency to retch, crept to the bow of the skiff, and entrusted himself with the utmost reluctance to the weed again.

When he had hauled the skiff into open water again he clambered into it and dried himself and pulled his clothes on, and then took a couple of deep pulls on a flask he had among his meagre stores. The dim "star" was still visible, this time moving away toward the eastern horizon. He looked after it hatefully. He'd been lucky this time, but it was in no sense a victory.

If they were hunting for him on Skereth they knew why he was

here and where he was most likely to go—to Rillah, which was Ardric's home city. Their course across this landlocked sea was also the course to Rillah, and they would inevitably be there long before him. So he would have to change all of his plans, such as they were. He would not head straight for Rillah now, but would have to land somewhere many miles out of his way and circle around to come at the city from another direction. Because of course they would be waiting for him.

*They.* Impersonal word, meaning Federation police possibly, Skereth police certainly, the local authorities of Rillah, and, if Ardric was still alive, Ardric himself and Lord knew who else. The whole damned city would be watching for him. He wouldn't have a chance.

Not a chance.

Weariness and black despair came over Horne. What's the use, he thought, I might as well have let them take me back there. I might as well go over the side and have done with it. Or else try and get away from Skereth, out to one of the fringe worlds. There are lots of places where a man can lose himself.

Lose himself is right. No, the devil with that kind of a life.

Thirty-seven people and a good ship, and they say I did it. They

say I was a lousy drunken negligent murderous fool.

Horne clenched his fists and beat them gently on the gunwale. Every time he thought he had it fought down and under control it came back on him and the agony was just as great as ever.

He looked over the dark sea toward Rillah, where the last gleam of the cone's light was disappearing. It would pass on above the coast and the coastal range and the outer and inner valleys, heading out across the vast plain beyond them where the city stood at the junction of two rivers.

"I'll be damned if I'll let him get away with it," he said aloud and fiercely. The face of Ardric came clearly into his mind, the nice clean-cut intelligent face that was perhaps just a little too thin in the mouth and too flinty in the eyes—only you'd never think of that until the bastard had stuck the knife right up to here in your back.

"If he is alive," said Horne softly, "I'll make him sorry the day he didn't die in the wreck of the *Vega Queen*!"

**H**E GOT OUT his chart and set a new course, far south of the one he had followed before. The flying cone was now out of sight entirely. He set the speed lever

wide open and the skiff leaped over the black water, streaking bright fire behind it.

Night and day are long on Ske-reth, and the twilights in between are slow and lingering. It was still dark when Horne finally made his landfall on a deserted coast, hiding the skiff under a tumble of rock where the overfrowning cliffs had fallen on the narrow beach. Dawn saw him crossing the saddle of a mountain pass, walking with a dogged steadiness, his few supplies slung between his shoulders and his long lean body bent to the slope of the rise. When full morning came he had reached the foothills above the plain and stood looking out at a tawny emptiness apparently as vast as the sea he had left behind him.

He drank deeply at a spring, ate a few mouthfuls of his remaining food, slept for a time in a crevice of the rocks, and went on again. And the long, long day dragged on.

Noon. The invisible orange-yellow sun stained the clouds with streaks of gold and bloody crimsons and unexpected mauves. Heat filtered like a physical substance through the cloud-layers, filling the space between land and sky so that even the wind that blew and blew and never stopped blowing across the flat plain could not cool it. The looped windings of a river

seemed like molten brass running from some huge crucible, and the spiny trees beside it were the color of dull flame. Yellow grasses grew waist high, rippling under the furnace wind, and every so often the colors in the sky would darken to a sullen purple and everything that moved became still and waited.

It was just before the breaking of one of these storms that Horne saw the watchtower. It was obviously very old, a broken relic left over from an earlier and ruder day. It had probably had no watcher in it since men took to the sky and the use of artificial eyes and ears. But Horne did not like it even so. It made him feel helpless and exposed. On the rare occasions when he had sighted a cone—he had purposely chosen a route away from the regular flight lanes—he had been able to lie hidden in the long grass until the danger was past. But this tower was stationary and he was going to have to pass it, and there was no possibility of concealment.

The first gust of the storm, a blast that made the normal gale seem feeble, blew him to his hands and knees and then the slatey darkness clapped down and hid the tower and everything else under cloud and driving rain. The idea occurred to Horne to use the storm as cover. The wind was blowing



his way. He let it take him.

And take him it did. It drove him staggering this way and that and the rain came in solid torrents like a waterfall and the lightning was amazing. He had never tried walking in a Skereth storm before and he found out very quickly why it was not a good idea. You lost all idea of direction and the thunder made you deaf and the lightning blind, and the rain drowned you standing up. He caught glimpses of the tower two or three times, outlined in a shaking glare, and then he didn't see anything any more at all until a deep gully opened suddenly right under his feet, choked to its banks with rushing water. He whirled around, dropping to all fours and clawing away to avoid being blown into the gully, and with incredible abruptness men appeared around him—he was not sure how many, two, three, four, staggering at him, reaching out to grab him.

There had been watchers in the tower, then. Even this far out from Rillah they were waiting for him. They had seen him from a distance and guessed that he might try to get past the tower in the storm. They were not going to let him.

Horne snarled like an animal and sprang at the nearest man.

They fell down on the sodden grass, under the pounding rain.

Horne beat with his fists at the man's head. Hands caught him from behind and dragged him off, and he turned crouching and fought them and they whirled clumsily in the wind and rain and then all of a sudden the lightning seemed inside Horne's head and he never heard any following thunder.

When he came to again he was in a stone room with a broken ceiling through which some rain found its way. A modern portable lamp burned brightly in a corner. He was lying on his back on a very dirty floor and four wet and muddy men were looking down at him.

Four men and a woman.

The woman was young, more of a girl than a woman, and she was not wet and muddy. She was dressed like the men, in a loose shirt of some silken material, shorts and sandals, but the shirt and shorts fitted her quite differently. She had long yellow hair and rather greenish eyes and her expression was far too somber for anybody that young and that good-looking.

"Are you awake now?" she asked him, in good Universal with a trace of the same accent Ardrick had had. It made Horne bristle. He sat up, rubbing his head and glowering around. He did not have to feel for his gun. One of the men was holding it.

"Yes," he said. "I'm awake."

He got to his feet, dizzy but too proud and angry to admit it. "Who are you with?" he demanded. "The police, or Ardric? Oh is it both?"

The girl said, "We are with Morivenn."

"Morivenn?" Horne was still dazed and did not immediately get it. Then he said, "But Morivenn died in the *Vega Queen*."

"I know," the girl said. "I'm his daughter."

### CHAPTER III

HORNE STOOD still while the lightning blazed beyond the window slits and the thunder shook the stones.

Then he said quietly, "I'm sorry. And I suppose you'll have to kill me if you've made up your mind to it. But I was not responsible for the wreck."

He thought a glance passed between the four men. The girl's face remained set and uncommunicative.

She said "There are men in Rillah who say you were."

"There are men in Vega Center who say so too. That doesn't make it so." He paused. "What does Ardric say?"

"Ardric is dead."

"Are you sure of that?"

She did not answer that. "Tell me about the wreck."

He told her, while the water dripped noisily down the stones

and the men watched him with closed, hard faces.

"The course was altered after I set it. And a man doesn't lie for hours in a drunken stupor on one glass of brandy. Somebody planned very carefully to destroy the ship and in order to do so I had to be gotten out of the way. This worked out just fine, because if there were any survivors I, or my memory, would take the blame and nobody would think to look for any other cause."

Horne added, his face taking on that dark iron look again. "He must have wanted awfully bad to kill your father."

"Ardric?"

"Who else? He was my co-pilot. Nobody else could have done it."

"But Ardric died in the wreck. Would he have killed himself, too?"

"Fanatics have been known to do just that. Only Ardric was no fanatic, he was a spaceman and a man of the world, the real hard world where two and two always make four. He didn't have to die in the wreck. All he had to do was get away in a lifeboat and keep out of sight. Go home, where he's among friends and can spit in the Federation's eye."

"We're not all his friends," said the girl. "Sit down."

She motioned him to a block of stone that had fallen from some-

where above, and sat down herself on another one. The storm was slackening now, rolling away across the plain. One of the men climbed up a winding stair that was part of the outer wall and still sound almost to the top. He disappeared overhead. The others remained where they were, between Horne and the door.

Horne looked at the girl. "Then he is alive," he said.

"I think so. I'm not sure." She leaned forward, searching his face with remarkably wise eyes, neither friendly nor hostile, merely making an estimate of the sort of man he was, how far he might be trusted, how much he might be expected to understand.

"You are named Horne?"

"That's right."

"I am called Yso. These four are my friends, as they were friends of my father. Now. I think I believe your story of the wreck, Horne. And I think we can help each other. . ."

"Maybe," said Horne, "and you look like a nice girl, though I can't say I'm wild about your friends. But I'm only interested in finding Ardric and choking the truth out of him. The politics of Skereth are your affair, not mine."

He stood up and looked at the man who was holding his gun.

The man shook his head. "Please

don't try it," he said. "We've gone to such great risk and trouble to intercept you that I would hate to be forced to burn your leg off."

**H**ORNE FROWNED, his head held slightly forward, his knees bent and tense.

"I mean just that," said the man quietly.

"I think you do," said Horne, and shrugged, and sat down again. He looked with bleak resentment at the girl. "Do you get many recruits this way?"

"We have no time for politeness," she said. "You don't understand how things are here. You think all you have to do is get into Rillah and find Ardric and choke the truth out of him. It's not that easy. If we hadn't found you and stopped you here you'd be dead long before sundown. You'd never even reach the walls of Rillah."

"I knew they'd be waiting for me," Horne said dourly. "A flier nearly caught me on the sea, and I was pretty sure it was police headed for Rillah."

"The police," said the man with the gun, "are the least of your worries. You say you're not interested in our politics, but you'd better get interested, because you're in them over your head. Morivenn—"

"Never mind that now, Ewan,"

said the girl Yso. "We—"

"No," said Ewan stubbornly, "he might as well get the whole picture now. It'll save us all trouble later." He turned again to Horne. "Morivenn was on his way to Vega Center to bring Skereth into the Galactic Federation. Ardric saw to it that he never got there and in killing Morivenn he not only stopped the Federation movement here, he also pretty nearly wrecked the Federation party. Morivenn was a strong leader and there was no one to replace him. But Ardric didn't do all that on his own, just as a matter of political conviction."

"I don't particularly care," said Horne, "why he did it. All I want is to make him admit doing it. I want my name cleared. From there on anybody can have the ball that wants it."

"All right," said Ewan. "You only want Ardric. Do you know who he is, how powerful his family is? Do you know what connection they have with the Vellae?"

"The Vellae?"

"The anti-Federation party. Do you know why the Vellae are so determined to keep Skereth out of the Galactic Federation that they'll murder thirty-odd people to get the one man who endangers them? Do you know what they'll do to you, Horne, the second you show your face in Rillah? Well, I'll tell

you."

"The Vellae *own* Rillah. It's the fountainhead and stronghold of the anti-Federation movement. A man named Ruric is one of the three top men, the triumvirate that runs the Vellae and right now, through their puppet governors, this whole world. Ruric is the father of Ardric. Do you begin to get the picture, Horne? Do you still think you'll walk right up to Ardric on the street and make him confess?"

Horne only said, "Go on. Let's have the rest of it."

"The rest of it," said Ewan, "is money and power and pride. The Vellae were the rulers of most of Skereth before the Galactic Federation was ever heard of. Since the advent of space flight and trade with other systems they've enlarged their field of operations. They own most of the merchant fleet and control most of the commerce. And since non-Federation ships are immune from search by Federation authorities, they don't have to stop at the legal stuff. We know that they use slave labor in some of their operations. We know that they bring in non-humans and semi-humans from the fringe worlds, strictly against Federation law. You see what they stand to lose if the truth about Morivenn's death should get out? The *Vega Queen* was a Federation packet, full of

Federation personnel. Deliberate sabotage would constitute an act of war, and even the Vellae can't stand off the whole Federation navy. And if Skereth is "pacified" and brought into the Galactic Federation, the Vellae are through. Their monopolies will be broken, their activities supervised, their ships searched. They won't be the lords of Skereth any longer. Now, How long do you think they'll let you run to stir up talk and suspicion against their man Ardric?"

"There's another reason, too," said Yso. Her tone was so sombre and full of apprehension that Horne was startled. "The most important reason of all. My father was sure of it. The only way to save Skereth, he told me, and perhaps other worlds too, was to get Federation law and authority in here before the Vellae were ready for it. He was afraid. They're doing something, he told me, something that will change our history and the history of this whole part of the galaxy, but I don't know what it is."

Ewan made an impatient sound. Apparently they had been over this ground before.

"I still think Morivenn had an obsession on that point," he said. "The Vellae's obvious motives are good enough, without hunting for secret ones."

"All right," said Yso angrily, "you explain what happens to the slaves they bring in from the fringe worlds. We know they come. But after they reach Skereth, they vanish completely. Where?"

"I'll admit it's a problem," said Ewan. "I just don't think it's as important as your father did, that's all." He looked at Horne. "Are you convinced now?"

"One thing kind of puzzles me," Horne said. "What's your big interest in whether I get killed or not?"

"I should think," said Yso, "that would be obvious. You're the only actual witness against Ardric. Without you, even if we proved he was alive and in hiding, he could hardly be convicted." She shook her head. "We both want the same thing, Horne. We have to work together to get it. It would be better if we did it as friends."

Horne took a deep breath and made an honest effort to swallow his anger. The girl was right and he knew she was right. So he said,

"All right, how do we go at it?"

Before she could answer, the man who had climbed the tower stair called down with sudden urgency,

"Three fliers, coming this way!"

**I**NSTANTLY Ewan and the other two sprang up and one of them

switched off the portable light, burning forgotten in the corner even though the storm was past and the sky outside was bright again. Horne and the girl rose too. They stood still, listening, looking up. And the air, cooled briefly by the rain, grew hot and the wet stones steamed.

The man above came running down the steps. "They look as though they're going to investigate the tower. We'd better clear out."

Ewan went to the wall under the steps and swung out a pivoted stone. There was a narrow shaft beyond it in the thickness of a buttress. One of the other men picked up the light and gave a hasty look around. Yso entered the shaft and began to climb down and Ewan indicated that Horne should follow her. The "ladder" consisted of a series of holes cut in the stone and you half climbed, half slid with your back against the other side of the shaft.

"How big are they?" Ewan was asking, and the lookout said,

"Two single-seaters, and the other one's bigger. Carries three anyway, maybe four."

The shaft was not deep. There was an ancient and shaky-looking tunnel beneath it, short enough so that light from its far end seeped back in. "It comes out in a bend of the stream you nearly fell into,"

Yso said. "There's a fair-sized cave there, where the tower guards used to keep their mounts hidden in the old days. We have our fliers there."

Horne heard the stone door shut with a hollow grating sound overhead. For a few minutes there was only the enclosed and magnified sound of people moving and breathing in a tunnel. Then the noise of running water became louder and louder, and there was another noise mixed with it—a shrill high whistling. The cone-shaped fliers were close at hand.

Horne said, "What if they know about this passage and the cave too?"

Ewan answered from behind him, "Then we fight."

"Could I have my gun back now?"

Ewan gave it to him.

The daylight got brighter and the tunnel ended in a long slantwise flattish cave, quite obviously made by water erosion in the days when the stream had been higher and mightier in its bed. The muddy water rushed along now some distance below and there was a trail angling down to its brink that might possibly be climbed by animals with good stout claws. In the cave, standing improbably erect on their pointed bottoms and looking like oversized tops with their shiny round bubble canopies in place, were two

three-place fliers.

Yso laid a hand on Horne's arm and said, "Come with me." She started to run toward one of the fliers. Ewan spoke briefly to the three other men. They nodded and ran to the second flier. Ewan joined Yso and Horne.

The shrill whistling was very loud now, officious and irritating, rasping to the nerves. Horne kept glancing apprehensively at the long open front of the cave, which was really little more than a shelf gouged out of the river bank. It was steady as the Rock of Gibraltar on its anti-grav compensators.

The light landing ladder was down. Ewan climbed it, pressing a button on the rim. The canopy raised up. Ewan jumped in and leaned over to give Yso a hand up. Horne followed her. The cone was steady as the Rock of Gibraltar on its anti-grav compensators.

There were three seats in the small circular cockpit, two behind the operator's seat where Ewan was already taking his place. Horne sat behind with Yso. The canopy clapped shut.

Yso made a sudden sound that was almost, not quite, a scream.

Horne looked out through the clear plastic bubble.

A single-place flier had dropped down into the little gorge of the

stream and was hovering outside the cave. Horne could see quite plainly the expression of the pilot's face as he looked in.

"I guess," said Horne, "we fight."

## CHAPTER IV

THE NEXT FEW SECONDS went by so fast there was no counting them. Ewan said, "Strap in," and hit the levers on the flat control board in front of him. Horne clipped the padded belt around his waist. The cone lifted up and quivered and its jet unit bellowed softly in the cave. Yso, her face set and pale but not particularly frightened, was hunched over a small panel between the seats, swiftly closing relays. The cone was apparently armed.

Horne would have preferred a larger craft and considerably more space to maneuver in. He had served his hitch in the Federation Navy in the last border war. But you made out with what you had. He checked over his gun and then put it away. It would not do him any good here.

The flier outside the cave had shot up out of sight.

The second cone rose and cut in its propulsion unit. Ewan had the communicator going now. He was talking to the man at the controls of the other cone. "—break for it.

Once we get outside we can fight 'em."

"Let's go together, then. Spread. I'm hot."

"Watch out for the big one, it's probably heavy-armed. All *right*."

The two cones slammed on full power and went out of the cave like projectiles. The anti-grav lift slammed them again, this time from underneath, and they went straight up to avoid hitting the opposite wall of the gorge, shooting apart then in opposite directions. It was masterly flying. But it wasn't good enough.

The enemy was on top of them.

Horne looked up to see the pointed bottom of a one-man flier just above him, almost close enough to touch. Instinctively he ducked and it flipped away just microseconds short of a collision that would have wrecked both of them. Yso punched a firing stud and a spurt of pinkish light a hundred feet long leaped out viciously toward the darting hull. But in the same second Ewan altered his own course with violent suddenness. A return beam, but smaller and shorter, flicked at them from the small flier. Both missed.

"You spoiled my aim," said Yso matter-of-factly. "They're not polite, that's sure. No *insigne*."

"Vellae?" said Horne. He was looking at Yso with considerable

interest.

"Obviously. What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a woman fight before?"

"When I was in the Navy some of my best men were women. Are you Navy?"

"Skereth Planetary. We're not so big but we do know our business."

"Get that other one," said Ewan sharply. "There. Can you do it?"

The other one-man flier and the big cone with four men in it had concentrated on the second cone, which had happened to come closer to them. They were leaping and bobbing all over that part of the sky, their bubble canopies flashing dull glints of gold and crimson from the clouds above.

Yso said, "Hold steady. I'll try."

She fired. The wicked pink beam lashed out from some orifice in the rim of the hull. The big cone shot aside and the beam flicked by and hit the one-man craft, burning viciously against its hull. Grav-shields crippled, it up-ended and plunged downward, but meanwhile the big cone got two shots in against the hull and canopy of the escaping craft. Horne heard them clearly like two cracks of an enormous whip. The one against the hull was glancing. The one against the canopy hit square. The plastic fused. The men beneath it took fire



like torches. It looked like a cruel death and it was, but it was also very quick. The hull floated on, tilted drunkenly, a great cup holding flame and ash and bitter smoke.

Ewan said something under his breath, and Yso turned her head away, looking sick. But there was no time for mourning. The big cone had made a perpendicular leap straight up and was now high above them. The smaller one was down on the deck, almost brushing the long grass.

**E**WAN'S HANDS moved fast on the controls, Horne felt himself pushed hard into the belt and then into the seat, his neck all but snapping as the cone skittered wildly in an attempt to break free. Twice he saw pink flashes in the air. Then something hit them a violent blow. They were all thrown forward and down. Horne's belt held him in his seat but his head just missed the corner of Yso's firing panel on its way down to hit his knees. When he got his breath partly back he saw that Ewan was lying on the control board and not trying to get up. Their cone was spinning in a crazy spiral, going up and away to nowhere.

Yso mumbled something about, "They hit us." She was dazed, but hanging on, trying to make sense.

Horne unclipped his belt. The motion of the cone almost hurled him through the canopy but he clung to the back of Ewan's seat with all his strength and pulled himself over to where he could grasp Ewan's shoulder.

"Is he dead?" asked Yso.

"I don't think so. Banged his head—" Ewan was bleeding like a pig from the nose. The controls were all slippery with it. Horne heaved Ewan out of the way and tried to remember which levers were which. He had flown these craft before, but not for quite a while. He pulled one and it was the right one and the spinning motion slowed.

"Make it fast," said Yso flatly. "They're right after us."

It must have been the smaller flier's less lethal beam that had hit them glancingly from below. Now both it and the big one were closing for the kill. Horne said, "Keep 'em busy," and began the business of getting the unconscious Ewan unbuckled and out of the operator's seat and himself into it.

Yso fired with the cold fury of desperation, lacing the sky with pink beams.

The Vellae cones danced up and out of the way and came on again.

"Now," said Horne, taking the controls in his hands, "I'm going to make a crash maneuver. Stand

by."

"Standing by," said Yso.

The cone flopped and whirled groundward. It looked disabled, but Horne kept its motion so erratic and deceptively shifty as to speed that it was hard to hit. The little Vellae cone stayed off. The big one followed Horne down, impatiently waiting for a clear shot.

When he was about twenty feet off the ground Horne said, "Here we go." The cone zoomed straight up at terrific speed. Horne could feel himself being flattened down into the seat and the air shrieked around the canopy. "Fire!" he shouted. "Damn it, fire!" The big cone was just above them, was level with them, was under them. Horne saw the faces of the men for one split second, as they understood what had happened and what was about to happen. Then they disappeared in a blossom of pink fire and fell away fast, fast, dwindling to a dark coal trailing smoke behind it, and the clouds were getting close enough to touch.

Horne adjusted the grav-shields. The dizzy upward falling slowed gradually and stopped. They hung motionless under a great curved belly of red-gold cloud.

Yso said, "Did we do it? Are we still alive?"

Horne grunted. "I think so."

He shook his head to clear it,

and looked down. The wrecked cones, three of them, were sending up lazy ribbons of smoke from out of the tawny grass, far below. The one-man flier had pulled back to where it could run, if it wanted to. It mounted a lighter weapon than the big craft, but it was faster.

The communicator burred. Horne turned it on.

A voice said, "Horne?"

Horne stiffened. A great wave of heat passed over him and then he was as cold as a piece of steel.

"Ardric," he said.

The one-man cone hung glittering in the distance, under the brilliant clouds.

"Oh, no," said the voice from the communicator, the remembered voice that Horne would have known if he had heard it anywhere in the universe. "Ardric is dead. He died in the wreck of the *Vega Queen*, and his family put on mourning and cried."

"You lousy yellow-bellied skunk," said Horne. He reached out suddenly and grasped the control levers. Their cone streaked toward the hovering flier.

It darted out of reach with mocking ease. Ardrick laughed.

"Try again," he said.

A KIND OF BLINDNESS came upon Horne, so that he could only see the small cone with its

glittering canopy and nothing else in the world. He hunched over the controls and tried again.

The little cone skipped and darted and whirled as swiftly as a sunbeam and he pursued it, tantalizingly just too slow, maddeningly burdened with his extra size and armament. But he would not give up.

Yso had shut off the communicator. She was talking to him, but he would not listen.

In the narrow space of the cockpit floor, Ewan stirred and groaned and got to his knees.

Horne barely heard him. He said to Yso, "Ready now. . . I'll get him on the next pass."

I'll get him, he thought. I'll burn him out of the sky.

He started to shove the control levers for another pass and Ewan knocked his hands away and tried to push him out of the seat. Ewan had been talking to Yso and had heard her better than Horne had.

"Are you crazy? He's just playing with you, waiting for more of his men to come. We've got to—"

Horne pushed him away. "Let me alone. I'll kill him."

Ewan swore. He hit Horne alongside the head. The blow stung Horne but it neither dazed him nor shocked him to his senses. It merely made him turn around and knock Ewan into the back of the

cockpit with the same casual anger he would have applied to a wasp or a bee. Then he returned to the business of Ardric.

Yso screamed at him shaking his shoulder. "Look there to the north, Horne! There, there!"

She was so insistent and shrill that he took his eyes away from Ardric's flier for a second. And in the north he saw a flight of five cones, coming fast.

Horne shivered and ran his hands over his face, like a man waking from sleep.

He sent the flier racing away.

The communicator made its signal and he opened it again. Ardric's voice said,

"It won't do you any good to run. We have the best fliers on Skereth. But I suppose you won't make it easy for us."

Horne did not answer. He did not have any words in him. He shut off the communicator. The cone fled through the brassy sky, above the yellow-tawny plain.

Ewan sat up, holding his injured face. "Head east as much as you can," he said. "There are mountains there. We might be able to lose them."

Horne angled east. The jet unit roared wide open, but the Vellae cones crept slowly, steadily closer. Here nothing depended on the skill of the pilot. It was a simple and

unarguable matter of mechanical superiority.

A heavy shadow on the eastern horizon grew high and thick and jagged and became a mountain range.

Horne measured the distance to the mountains, and then he watched the Vellae cones for a while, estimating the rate at which they were overtaking him. He computed mentally, and he didn't like the result of his computations.

"We aren't going to make it, are we?" Yso said.

Horne shook his head. "It doesn't look too good. If we only had a storm or even a low cloud to hide in—"

But the storms were too far away and the clouds were all too high for the unpressurized, low-altitude cones.

Ewan said, "Let me back there."

Horne surrendered the controls without argument. It was Ewan's flier. Maybe he could do something more with it.

He did a little more. He nursed just a fraction of extra speed out of it. The mountains rushed at them. The Vellae cones continued to overhaul them but not so fast.

There were lower clouds now, over the crests of the mountain peaks. "If I can get into one," Ewan said, "I'll try dropping down in a valley somewhere beyond the

ridge and hope they go over us."

"Wouldn't it be better to—"

Yso started to say, and Ewan cut her short.

"We're about out of fuel. So that doesn't give us much choice."

A minute later he said, "Keep an eye out for peaks. Here we go."

The cone plunged into a mass of cloud and the whole world was lost beyond the thick dark mist.

ALMOST AT ONCE Ewan slowed his forward speed and shifted off on a sharp tangent. Horne and the girl sat tensely, straining their eyes for solid shadows in the mist. The Vellae cones had disappeared along with everything else. Ewan jockeyed the flier through a broad gap, of which both sides were invisible, between the peaks and crossed the backbone of the range. Then he began to drop with dangerous swiftness, looking for a place to come down.

There wasn't any.

Where the trailing cloud-mass thinned there were only sheer cliffs and sharp ridges, rockfalls and chasms that seemed to have no bottom. On this inhospitable mountain face there were not even any trees.

The jet coughed twice and died.

Momentum carried them a little farther, floating on anti-grav alone now and battered helplessly

by every wind, blowing fiercely through the passes and around the slopes.

Horne said, "We might as well go down ourselves as get knocked down."

"Either way," said Ewan, "we won't like it."

The cone dropped, wobbling down the lower slopes like a loose bubble while the wind tried to turn it over and smash it on the rocks.

Horne said suddenly, "I've got an idea."

He told them his idea, rapidly. Ewan grunted. "A hundred to one gamble. But we might as well play it."

The clouds were still thick and low overhead and there was no sign yet of the Vellae cones, which must be searching for them but which might not find them, with any luck, for a little while yet.

"Can you bring her down there?" Horne said to Ewan, pointing to a ledge of rock halfway up an otherwise sheer cliff. The ledge slanted and a long crack full of rubble ran from the low end of it, angling down across a less precipitous shoulder of the mountain. It looked as though it might offer both shelter and a way down.

Ewan said sourly, "Of course, landing there without jets will be easy." But he started to play with

the grav-shields, tipping the cone around so that its own attraction-repulsion balance brought it nearer and nearer to the ledge.

Horne pulled off his shirt and arranged it over the back of his seat, so that from a distance it would look as though someone was still sitting there.

"You too, Yso," he said.

She stared at him, and he shouted, "Would you rather be modest or alive?"

Turning away from him, she peeled off her shirt and stretched it over the seat back. Then she sat hunched up with her arms folded across her front.

Horne had other things to think about. He helped Ewan out of his shirt one arm at a time while the cone flopped and heaved and side-slipped toward the ledge. "There," he said, "that may satisfy them if they don't come too close."

The ledge flew at them, tilted crazily.

"Be ready to jump," said Ewan, "the instant we touch."

Horne put his hand on the canopy release.

**T**HE CONE CRACKED down hard on the ledge against the cliff face. Horne sprung the canopy. He practically threw Yso out. The cone toppled, tottered, and began to lift. Ewan jumped

and landed on all fours. He was screaming at Horne. Horne saw the ledge going away from him and flung himself frantically into the air. He hit far too near the edge for comfort. Ewan grabbed him and dragged him in. They crouched together panting on the rock and watched the cone drift off, tossed and battered by the wind. When it was far less than the range of a shot away it was impossible to tell that the three bright shirts showing through the canopy had no people in them.

"All right," said Horne. "Let's find cover."

They scuttled along the ledge and down into the crack, which was much bigger than it had looked from a distance and full of big boulders. They crawled in like three animals among the crevices and lay there, watching.

Their derelict cone drifted farther and farther away. Presently one of the Vellae cones dropped out of the overcast and spotted it. Apparently Ardric's force had split up for the search. The Vellae cone made one pass at the derelict and hit it squarely with a beam on the first try. It burst into flame and began a spiral plunge downward. The Vellae cone hit it again on the way down to make sure. It crashed out of sight into a maze of narrow rocky gorges. The Vellae

cone rose up high and hovered.

Presently the rest of the force joined it. They watched for a while until the last thin wisp of smoke had blown away. Then they lifted up, and went whistling over the ridge toward Rillah.

Ewan said tightly, "It worked."

Horne looked bitterly after Ardric and muttered, "Some day, so help me—"

Then the two men and the girl pulled themselves out from under the rocks and began the long and dangerous climb down to whatever lay below.

By Earth reckoning the descent would have taken them about a day and a half. This being Skereth, the sky was still burning with the furious colors of sunset when they stood above the last slope and looked out over the most God-forsaken badland Horne had seen on any world, bar none.

Red and purple and yellow sky, above red and yellow, brown and purple and sandy rock. And the rock was cut and gouged and churned as though in imitation of the stormy clouds above it, then frozen by some gorgon breath into a permanent nightmare.

There was no place to go but on. Thirst and hunger were vital things with them now. There might be water in some of those crazy cracks, and where there was water there

might also be food.

They went on, stumbling and staggering, while the glaring colors turned somber and died out of the sky and were dimmed in the rocks beneath, and gradually everything was made to look softened and lovely in the long, long twilight.

They didn't find any water. They found fine dry sand at the bottom of a serpentine crevice, and they followed the sandy bed partly because it was easier walking and partly because they no longer had any clear idea of what they were doing.

Instinct and reaction still functioned. Horne stopped suddenly, reaching for his gun. It was very heavy and he had difficulty with it. Yso stopped too and went down on her knees and Ewan stumbled over her.

"Quiet," mumbled Horne. "Listen."

In the twilight and the empty rock, somewhere near them, something moved, and it did not move like anything human.

## CHAPTER V

IT HAD BEEN a quick and furtive sound, as though some creature scurried out of sight to lie in wait around the next bend of the crevice. Horne shook his head violently to clear the cob-

webs out of it.

"Stay here with Yso," he said to Ewan, who also had a gun. "I'll try and see what it is."

He started forward, one step at a time. He was very tired and curiously reluctant for any more fighting. He wanted to lie down and die, or sleep, he didn't much care which, so long as it was restful. But he went on toward the dark pillar of rock, dragging his feet.

A voice spoke to him. It was very queer, creaking, rusty voice with long-drawn sibilants and a general sound as though human speech was a trial to it.

"Don't sssshoot," it said. "Pleasse. I am friend."

Horne stopped, a quiver running down his backbone. "Friend, are you?" he said harshly. "Then why are you hiding?"

"People sssshoot," said the voice. "Too quick. I have food and water for you. Pleasse?"

Horne laughed. "You do, huh? For us. That's fine. But it's kind of a silly lie. You couldn't possibly know anything about us."

The voice said, "Fife has a radio. He heard the talk of the Vellae."

"Fife?"

"Our leader."

"But the Vellae thought we were dead."

"We were closer to the wreckage

than they. There were no bodies in it. . . Fife sssaid you got away. We have looked for you all this time—”

“Who are you?” Horne said.

“I am Chell of Chorann.”

Horne remembered dimly that Chorann was out on the rim of the galaxy somewhere and not much explored. He said, “Yes, but who are you with? What’s your group? You said *we*.”

Chell said quietly, “We are those few who escaped from the Vellae slave-pens.”

Yso caught her breath and stood up. She came forward.

“Tell him to come out, Horne. I want to talk to him.”

“Don’t ssshoot?” said Chell.

“Not unless you do something you shouldn’t,” Horne said.

There was the faint sound, louder and furtive this time, but still in some way not human. A peculiar shadow moved out slowly from behind the rock, taking on bulk and solidity in the twilight gloom.

“Sssee?” said Chell, without rancor. “Safer for usss of Chorann to ssspeak first.”

Horne saw very well. He would have done exactly what Chell feared, shot first and wondered later what the devil it was he killed. The creature was round as a balloon, with an indefiniteness of outline that suggested fur or thick bristles. It was frighteningly big,

four feet across at least. It seemed to half float in the air and half walk on four of the five long tentacles that grew from its lower hemisphere. The fifth one was curled up holding a bundle. There was no head, no visible eyes, no face. Just a big round furry ball that talked.

Ewan said something that sounded like, “I’ll be damned.”

Yso shrank back a bit by Horne’s shoulder, but she said firmly, “We’re glad to meet you, Chell. We’ve known for a long time that the Vellae brought in slaves from other worlds, but you’re the first one I’ve actually spoken to. Are there many of you hiding here?”

“You will see,” Chell said. He put down his bundle and tactfully drew back a little way. “Drink and eat now while I call the others. Then we will take you to Fife.”

Ewan said suspiciously, “What others?”

“Searchers like myself.” With just a hint of impatience, Chell said, “If we had meant you harm we would simply have not looked for you. You would all, I think, be dead before the next dawn. This way leads to no water.”

Horne said equably, “That makes sense, I guess. All right, Chell, we’ll trust you.”

That was big of him, Horne



thought, because he really had no choice.

HE PICKED UP the bundle and opened it. There were two big plastic flasks of water and some strips of smoked meat that Horne could not identify and did not particularly want to. He was in no mood to question anything in the way of food. They ate and drank, and Horne kept one eye on Chell, who had gone even farther away and was apparently not doing anything.

"I thought you were going to call your friends," he said,

"I am calling them. Our normal voices are too high for your hearing. That is why we sound funny when we speak to you."

Yso said, "It's a pity we couldn't have known about you before. Everything might have been different. Morivenn might not have died, the Vellae might have been completely crushed—You said your lead has a radio. Couldn't you have got in touch with us somehow?"

She sounded almost hysterical about it. Reaction, Horne thought. Too much strain and violence, too many shocks.

Chell only said, "Remember that we know very little of your world. Fife heard from the talk of the Vellae that you were their enemies, and that it was important to them

that you should all die. So we wanted to keep that from happening. Otherwise—"

Horne could sense the shrug that was physically impracticable but implied.

"Otherwise," said Chell, "to us the people of Skereth are all enemies."

Two more round shadowy shapes came skimming over the rim of rock against the skyline and dropped down with that curious half-floating glide into the crevice.

"Are you ready?" asked Chell politely. "Then we go."

He moved toward the humans and the others followed.

"Now wait a minute," said Ewan, pulling back. "How are we going?"

"We carry you. Much easier than walking, especially at night. Don't fear. Chorann is a heavier world than this. Burdens are light for us here. That is why the Vellae find us so useful."

Horne felt tentacles like enormously strong wire cables wrap around him. Then the creature—he was not sure if it was Chell or one of the others—inflated itself even bigger, exactly like a balloon, and bobbed upward, holding him in carefully against a mat of thick warm fur and helping itself along with a free pair of tentacles outstretched to catch projecting points

of rock.

"We are able," said Chell, "to extract pure hydrogen from the air, as sea-creatures extract oxygen. Physically, we're mostly an air-sac. So do not fear to fall."

Horne abandoned himself to not fearing anything. It seemed that about all he could do right now was go along with what was happening. The fur against which he was so firmly pressed was incredibly soft and had a dry, faintly dusty, not at all unpleasant smell. The body underneath it was weirdly boneless and resilient. Very dimly, as though from far inside it, he could hear the sounds of life—the rhythmic heartbeat, the in-out sigh of breathing.

They travelled swiftly, skimming and gliding over the dark rock in the starless night, across the dry winding gullies and bitter flats of the badlands, like swimmers under water. And after a time there was a fleck of light.

They went toward it and it grew into a gleam from some hidden lantern, left out purposely for a cautious guide. Horne caught the glint of a narrow stream and the moist smell of it on the air. Then he was set on his feet in sparse grass and the lantern glow was directly ahead of him, beyond a narrow door of stone.

A figure was standing in front

of the door, a sharp black silhouette against the light.

"This is Fife," said Chell. "He is not what you call human either."

Fife said, "None of us are human here." His voice was high and piping, with a sly mocking note in it. But we all look so queer to each other that you won't be out of place. Come in."

They came, Horne and Ewan stooping to pass the door, following him into a large chamber hollowed in the soft red sandstone. The lantern, a portable atom-battery type, was on the floor in the center. Fife picked it up and hung it from a hook in the ceiling and Chell, who was the last one through, dropped a curtain down over the door.

"The Vellae don't often come this way," Fife said, "but it pays to be careful."

**H**E TURNED and studied them. Horne tried to guess at what his world of origin might be, but he could not. Fife was small and lean, perhaps five feet high, completely hairless and marked rather beautifully over his gray skin with shadings of electric blue, banded with fine lines of black and yellow, on his breast and back and along his limbs. His eyes were yellow too, all iris and very bright, and quite unreadable.

"These are the rest of us," he said, gesturing with a thin four-fingered hand. "As you see, not many leave the Vellae."

Horne looked beyond him in the lantern light. There were perhaps twenty-four people in the rock chamber, only people was the wrong word. They were the most wildly assorted crew Horne had ever seen. Three of them, a woman and two men, were the most humanoid in size and shape. Only their fantastically long pointed ears and over-prominent teeth gave them away, together with a vestigial ridge of fur over the spine. Then there were Chell's folk—considerably smaller now and rolled companionably together in a corner, their fur showing a bright green in the lamplight, their tentacles bright red. Like Christmas ornaments, Horne thought hysterically, and then caught himself. There were two huge-eyed hairy things that must have been nine feet tall, with mild dejected faces. There were great gargoyle-like creatures, dull purple in color, with enormous clawed hands and ridiculous little wings. There were spidery-looking things with small bodies and too many long thin arms, splendidly adapted for climbing, Horne thought, on rocky surfaces. He became dizzy with their crowded strangeness. There were

odd ones, loners, who between them covered just about every size and shape and mutation of human, animal, and insect you could imagine. They were all powerful in their own way, capable of performing some particular function superlatively well.

"Now," said Fife, "we are curious. Why did the Vellae want so badly to kill you?"

They explained, acutely conscious of the many eyes that watched them, shiveringly aware that they were not watched with any love. Horne understood that to these creatures now all humans would appear as enemies. It dawned on him, not with any great shock of surprise, that they had been brought here on probation, as it were, and were quite likely to be killed if their story didn't stand up.

He challenged Fife with that, and the yellow-eyed man-thing nodded.

"I thought you might be of some use to us. We escaped the slave-pens, but we want to go farther than this. We want to go home. If we can, we want to free those others of our people who are held behind the locked gates of the Great Project. And especially we would like to kill as many of the Vellae as we can."

His eyes blazed with a most chil-

lingly human hatred.

"In any case, we can't hide forever here, crouching in a hole, half-starved, and always watching the sky for Vellae fliers. We'll die if we have to, but we want it to be to some purpose, something the Vellae won't forget."

A low muttering growl of agreement ran around the room.

Fife looked at the three humans. "You're of their own breed, and yet they hunted you. So for the present you live, because we need something we haven't got—a weapon, a piece of information, anything that will help us plan what we shall do. If you don't have it—" He shrugged expressively.

"Listen," said Horne, "we've suffered as much from the Vellae as you have. Her father, my ship and my whole career, and now all three of us are fugitives like you."

Fife said, "I listen eagerly. I am not your enemy—yet. I am nothing. We have a purpose. So have you. Let us see how they run together."

Ewan said angrily, "Why damn it, Morivenn worked for years and finally gave his life fighting the Vellae, largely on your account. His daughter and I—"

Fife said, "In the tunnels under Skereth we heard very little of Morivenn, or you." He turned to Horne. "Your story interests me.

You are not of Skereth, you say?"

"No," said Horne, "and like you I wish I'd never heard of it. I'm from Earth, a spaceman in the service of the Federation government."

He went on for the second time to explain exactly what had happened to him and how, and why he had come to Skereth.

"These people," he said, indicating Yso and Ewan, "went to a lot of trouble to keep me from getting killed too soon. They lost three men and very nearly lost themselves doing it. I'm like you, Fife, only interested in my own affairs, but I'm not so stupid as to throw away good allies. They want to overthrow the Vellae for political reasons. I don't think any of us will quarrel with them, either. I want one of the Vellae leaders, Ardric, so that I can prove he wrecked my ship. You want revenge and freedom. Good enough. They all work together."

He glanced around the room to see if he was getting home, but the huddled ring of alien faces baffled him completely. He couldn't tell what they thought. And Fife only said,

"I am open to instruction. Go on."

"Ardric is the key to everything. If we can get him and make him talk, everything else comes auto-

matically. The Federation legally can move in and smash the Vellae. The slaves illegally brought here will be freed and taken home. My name will be cleared, and Morivenn's party can bring Skereth into the Federation as a free world and not the private property of the Vellae."

Fife nodded slowly. "And how would we do this thing?"

"We know Ardris is in Rillah. We'd have to go there and get him."

"How?"

"There," said Horne, "I thought you might supply some ideas."

"Let us sit down," said Fife, "and discuss this matter."

They sat, on the bare cool sandstone, and the whole ring of weird unhuman forms moved in closer to hear. Horne sat beside Yso and kept his hand on hers. Ewan guarded her from the other side.

But it was Yso who said, "There are entrances to the pits in Rillah. You come from the pits, and yet you're on this side of the mountains. So the tunnels must run all the way through. Am I right?"

"You are," said the humanoid woman with the pointed ears, speaking for the first time. She wore an incongruously splendid piece of metallic embroidery that covered, very scantily, her fine mammalian breasts and ran in a

narrow strip down her front to supplement a sort of drapery of blue silk held loosely around her hips with a couple of big gold rings. If you didn't look any higher than her neck, and didn't mind the hackles, she was quite something. And she was looking with typical female interest at the dirty, bedraggled and half-naked Yso.

"I don't suppose," she said to Fife, "it's possible these people are spies, and all that show the Vellae put on of shooting down their cone was only a show for our benefit?"

## CHAPTER VI

FIFE SHOWED the edges of his sharp little teeth in what might have been a smile.

"I considered that possibility, Meeva," he said, "and I decided the chances were against it. Frankly, I doubt whether the Vellae would go to all that trouble just for us. We're not that important."

"Still," said one of the purple gargoyles, in halting Universal and a voice that sounded as though it came from three miles underground, "Meeva may be right. We are not good judges of how these humans think."

Fife nodded. "Right. Perfectly right."

"And," said Meeva, her pointed ears quivering with malice and ex-

citement, "see how quickly these humans came forward with their plan. 'The tunnels must run all the way through.' Oh, yes! And now we must run into Rillah itself. How? Through the tunnels!"

She sprang up, speaking passionately to the whole group.

"What would the Vellae like better than to get us back into the tunnels? Back into the slave-pens and the dark galleries of the Project?"

Some of the aliens said, "That's true." And they looked balefully with their strange eyes at the humans.

Meeva struck her breast dramatically. "I will not go back. I would rather stay here and die in the open air than to spend one more day in the tunnels. And I would rather kill myself here and now than trust the word of a human!"

She had a magnetic personality. Horne thought her speech was fairly corny but effective. At least, it was highly effective on her particular audience. He began to be afraid of her.

He stood up. "You don't have to take my word for anything," he said, "and you don't have to go anywhere, either. Just show us where the tunnels are and we'll go ourselves."

"Ah," cried Meeva, whirling on

him, "yes—then you could lead the Vellae here and kill us all!"

"Oh, hell," said Horne disgustedly, "women are women no matter what, I guess." He turned to Fife. "Who is she, anyway?"

Fife grinned maliciously, as though he had had trouble before with Meeva.

"She was a priestess where she came from," he said. "She had an enormous temple built all in beautiful white stone and hordes of people to wait on her, and they came from all over the world to hear her oracles."

The two men of Meeva's race jumped up and cried, "That is true—every word!"

Fife said, "If it is, the people of your world are great fools. Sit down, Meeva."

She started to open her mouth, and he said again, in a certain tone, "Sit down, Meeva. We do not need any of your oracles."

Meeva shut her mouth and sat down. The two men assisted her, making a great show of her preciousness. Meeva thanked them graciously and then said to Fife,

"Do as you will. But I stay here."

She folded her arms and retired from the argument, looking lofty. Horne felt easier. But then the purple gargolye said in its subterranean voice,

"Even charlatans can speak the truth."

"I know, I know," said Fife. He looked impatiently around the circle. "You chose me your leader, didn't you?"

"Yes," said the gargoyle.

"Why?"

"Because you are quicker of mind than we."

"All right. Now do you think I have become suddenly so stupid that I can't see what is obvious to everyone else?"

Fife looked up at Horne, and then from him to Ewan and the girl, and his eyes were bright, cruel, and utterly without mercy.

"I do not trust these humans either," he said. "But I weigh the chances. We are great gamblers in my home place, and since I left the egg I have been used to casting dice with both hands. So I say this.

"I say we go into the tunnels and on to Rillah, by the ways we know. Those who wish to stay here with Meeva can stay—a half-hearted friend is worse than an enemy. But I say this, too. The three humans go weaponless and each one with a guard, and if there is any treachery they will be the first to regret it."

**E**WAN SPRANG UP. "No!" he said. "I'm not going up against

the Vellae unarmed. Either you trust us or—"

"Ewan," said Horne quietly. "Look around you. Figure how many you could kill before the rest would tear you to pieces. Then think a minute about Yso."

Ewan growled something under his breath. But there was no denying the truth of what Horne said. He took his gun from his belt and threw it down in front of Fife. Then he sat down again.

Horne said to Fife, "I'm a gambler, too. I'll wager everything I have left—my life—against a million-to-one chance of getting my hands on Ardic. If this is the way you want to play the hand that's the way it will have to be. But before you're through you may wish you'd let us keep our guns." He handed his over, butt first.

"We'll be very careful of them," Fife said, grinning. "They're the only ones we have."

He looked around. "Now, then. Who's going into Rillah?"

The aliens began to mutter and shift about, talking among themselves. Horne watched them anxiously, thinking in terms of strength and feeling hopelessly handicapped by his total ignorance of what traps and dangers might lie before them. But Yso was thinking of something else. She leaned for-

ward.

"Fife, you said, 'behind the locked gates of the Great Project'. She—Meeva—mentioned it too. What is it?"

Fife said speculatively, "Don't you know?"

"No." She was extremely eager and excited, forgetting her weariness. "My father always believed that the Vellae were doing something so dangerous and forbidden that they didn't dare use Skereth labor, even the poor devils they practically conscript into some of their mines. He thought that was why they brought in the outworld slaves, like you."

Fife shrugged. "Your father would know the reasoning of his people better than I. I only know that we are taken in our sleep by armed men and drugged and brought in ships to Skereth, where we do not even see the daylight before we're unloaded in hidden hangars and taken into the pits. There we dig. We dig endlessly, making galleries, chambers, and more galleries, running here, there, up, and down. This is called the Great Project. But to what purpose we dug we were never told."

Yso gave Ewan a small glance of triumph. "Morivenn was right, though. There's no doubt about that."

"No," said Ewan, "and I'm

sorry. Not because I was wrong, but because the Vellae will be more watchful if they're guarding a great secret than if they were merely digging uranium or gold."

The gargoyle spoke. "We have decided."

The aliens were now sorted into two groups. One, a small bunch of seven or eight, were clustered around Meeva and her men. The other one of about fifteen, including the gargoyle and Chell's people, had moved over around Fife.

The gargoyle said, "To go is dangerous. But nothing will come of sitting here."

"Good," said Fife. "Now we must think." He rose and began to pace up and down, his eyes bright, the tip of his pointed tongue flicking back and forth over his lips. Suddenly he turned and pointed at Meeva.

"Since you won't risk your person, you can contribute your clothes. The humans must be dressed. The Vellae know we're slaves, but the humans must be able to pass as masters."

"No!" cried Meeva. "Never!" But Fife nodded to Chell and the gargoyle. They moved in swiftly. Fife paced, never looking toward the angry shrieking.

"You men will have to provide for yourselves. Uniforms, perhaps even a cone. That would help.



And—”

“Cones?” said Horne. “In the tunnels?”

“Oh, yes. One-man cones adapted to their special functions. How do you think the work is supervised and the slaves ordered and controlled? Yes, cones. That will be very necessary. We can’t hope to get all the way to Rillah without meeting someone, even in the older galleries. If we can seem to be a regular work party—”

“Here,” said Chell, bobbing up with a streamer of blue cloth waving from his tentacle. Fife took it and the strip of embroidery and tossed them to Yso. “I hope you appreciate them,” he said maliciously. “Meeva used to work quite naked to save her costume, and even here she only put it on once in a great while when she wanted to play priestess.”

Yso looked unhappily toward Meeva and said, “I’m sorry—”

Meeva, held forcibly in the gargoyle’s enormous hands, screamed a torrent of words, and Fife laughed.

“She never learned that kind of talk in any temple. Shut her up, Lurgh.”

Lurgh shook her and she was quiet. So were the two men of her race, nursing bruises now.

“We’ll sleep for four hours,” Fife said, “and those who are not

going with us can make a fair sharing of the food and fill the water flasks.”

He nodded to Horne. “Rest while you can. There won’t be much chance on the way to Rillah.”

## CHAPTER VII

THE GALLERY was cut wide and high through the living rock. It was dry and well-ventilated, partly through shafts that bored upward to the outside air. Horne figured that they must be hooded against rain and therefore against light too, because no light came through them although he knew that it must be day again in the outer world. Some of the slaves had had their work-lamps with them when they escaped. The purple gargoyle stalked ahead, wearing an incongruous star on his hideous brow, a guiding light to the rest of them.

At intervals along the gallery steel hatches were set into the right-hand wall—the “inner” wall, if Horne had figured rightly. They were coated with an anti-corrosive plastic and locked with curious-looking locks. Even Fife did not know what the hatches were for. He only knew that they were deadly dangerous to tamper with. Horne was not tempted to bother with them.

They had come a long way from

the refuge in the badlands, working their way by forced marches during the dark hours along the rim of the foothills until they reached the base of a particular bald humped mountain that was, Ewan said, close to Rillah on the other side.

While the slow dawn was breaking, Fife led them up a maze of canyons and rising ridges and into the mouth of an old boring half hidden by a slide.

"This must have been part of a mine once," Fife said. "This side of the mountain is full of them, I guess, but this is the only one I know. Some of them connect with the outer galleries of the Project, and that is how we few managed to escape. I think even most of the Vellae have forgotten these borings are still here."

He added, "Go softly. The roof is liable to fall."

They wormed their way through a claustrophobic nightmare of rubble and rotten shorings, with sand and pebbles sifting ominously down their necks, until a narrow opening let them through into the dry, solid gallery cut in the deeper rock. That had been, Horne thought, a devil of a long time ago and they had been climbing ever since. By now, they must be close to the top of the mountain, just inside the curve of the south

shoulder.

Tunnel in the rind of a mountain, with doors in it. What for? Even preoccupied as he was with Ardric and his intense need to find him, Horne could not help wondering now and again just what was hidden behind those locked doors, in the vast bulk of the mountain.

Yso and Ewan were restrained only by the grim warnings of the alien slaves from trying to find out.

Chell said suddenly, "Lurgh, put out your light."

Lurgh obeyed, instantly and without question. Everyone stopped, and they stood in the utter darkness, trying not to move or breathe while they listened.

Horne could hear nothing, but Chell's ultra-sonic ears were keener.

"There is a cone," he said. "Coming this way."

"Ah!" Fife's sharp whisper held both satisfaction and worry. "The Vellae patrol these outer galleries now and then, making sure that all is well. So. We will have a chance at a cone. If we take it, good. If we do not, we may as well kill each other quickly and mercifully on the spot. And it will have to be done fast. *Fast*, Horne, you hear? Otherwise he will call the others with his radio and it will all be useless."

Remembering the utter lack of facilities for ambush in the gallery, Horne said, "That's fine, but do you have any idea about how we do it?"

"Oh," said Fife, "I have a plan already. I've been making it ever since we entered the gallery."

He began to talk rapidly. When he was finished Horne said, "All right. Why argue? Let's get going."

Chell said, "The cone is still some distance away. You can risk a light for a few seconds."

A WORK-LAMP flicked on, turned so low it was hardly brighter than a match flame but almost blinding after the total dark. Chell wrapped three of his tentacles firmly around Horne and took an enormous breath. He rose to the ceiling and began bobbing along under it. Another one of the furry green balls picked Ewan up the same way. The others all began to run along the gallery, hurrying to get out of sight around a turn they had just passed. Horne saw Yso stop and look around, reluctant to leave them, and the entirely useless thought came to Horne that she was a very gorgeous thing in Meeva's scanty finery, with her long yellow hair hanging over her white shoulders. Then he called in a frantic whisper,

"Fife! Fife, what about the

guns?"

Fife paused long enough to shake his head. "You might damage the cone or the uniform. Don't worry, we'll give you all the help we can."

"Thank you," said Horne, "very much."

"Sssh!" said Chell. "It comes."

His companion, carrying Ewan, whispered, "Here it is." In the last gleam of the vanishing light Horne saw him disappear upward into one of the air-shafts. Chell followed him.

It was the devil of a place to be, hanging in the grip of a living green balloon, jammed into a hole in a mountain where he could not see anything at all and yet his life and the success of his whole mission and a lot of other things depended on his seeing clearly and not making the slightest mistake.

He couldn't see, but he could hear. There was a faint, muffled throbbing in the gallery below.

Then there was light.

Then there was a transparent canopy directly underneath him, with light glowing from two rods set in it, and the top of a man's dark close-cropped head and the tops of his shoulders in a red uniform tunic and his arms outstretched in red sleeves and his hands on the control levers.

Chell let his breath out and

dropped.

They landed together, with Horne on the bottom, on the slippery plastic bubble. Instantly Chell gripped onto the rim of the cone with three widespread tentacles and flung Horne out and down with the other tentacles. Horne caught a glimpse of Ewan apparently flying through the air and then the other green ball was beside Chell and the two of them with their combined weight and strength were overbalancing the light cone. The man inside it was craning his head upward, his mouth and eyes stretched wide. For the first moment or two he was not doing anything. Another few seconds, while he got his wits together again, and it might be too late.

Horne leaped for the rim and hit the canopy release.

The plastic bubble opened, almost throwing Chell and his friend but not quite. The cone was dragging now at a tilted angle and the man was clawing automatically toward the controls to level it again. But he was also trying not to fall clear out of his seat. Before he could make up his mind, Horne was on top of him.

The cockpit was only meant to hold one man. The red-uniformed guard tried first to get at his gun, but Horne's knee was already on it and crushing it into his side.

Then he bunched up his fists and snarled and pounded Horne as hard as he could around the face. Horne hit him back. He got his hands around the man's neck and choked him and beat his head against the inside coaming of the rim, but it was padded and the whole thing was ineffectual because there was no room to move in.

Ewan reached the controls from outside the cockpit and shut off the small propulsion unit and shifted the grav shields so the cone fell over easily and Chell could let go of it. Horne sprawled out on the rock floor, dragging the guard with him.

The guard looked past him and his face went perfectly white. He made one last desperate effort to get his gun out. Horne got his feet under him and hit the man solidly on the jaw, and the rest of the slaves came round and stood looking at the first Vellae they had ever seen lying prone and helpless at their feet. Horne slid the man's gun out of its holster.

Fife said, "Strip him." His face was at this moment not even remotely human.

By the time they had his uniform off him the man had opened his eyes again and was staring with a kind of helpless horror at the two hairy nine-foot giants who were holding him and the other

aliens that were around. Fife's eyes were brilliant. He held a gun in his hand.

"Stand away," he said.

**H**ORNE RAISED the gun he had taken from the guard. He pointed it at Fife and said mildly, "Why do you want to do that? You could be throwing away a lot of important information."

He thought for a minute that Fife was going to try killing him instead, but then he relaxed and let the gun fall to his side.

"Very well," he said. "We'll question him. Lurgh?"

The purple gargoyle came and squatted down beside the guard. He held up one huge hand and ostentatiously extruded from his finger ends, one by one, claws that would have been useful to a tiger. Then he laid his hand gently on the guard's chest, just below the throat.

"Ask him whatever you want," said Fife. "Lurgh will see that you get the answers."

Before Horne could speak Ewan had pushed forward and bent over the man. "What's behind those doors? What are you doing inside this mountain?"

The guard looked up at him with bitter contempt. "I know you," he said. "I've seen your picture often in the telecasts. You used

to be Morivenn's errand boy." He glanced around at the hostile alien faces bent over him. "So this is what you people are doing now that Morivenn's dead. Isn't this pretty low for any human, even a Federationist, to sink?"

Ewan said, "That doesn't answer my question."

"I'm not going to answer it." The guard's face was set now in the desperate hardness of a man who knows he is going to die and is determined to give his killers no satisfaction. "The doors are there. If you want to know what's behind them, go and look for yourself."

Horne pushed Ewan aside. "We can talk about that later. You men go back and forth to Rillah, don't you? You know most of what goes on?"

"We do."

"What do you know about Ardric?"

"Ardric?" said the man, surprised. "Why, he—" Then he broke off and his eyes became wary. "He's dead. I thought everyone knew that."

Fife said softly, "Lurgh—"

One of those sharp claws moved and hooked itself in the man's throat and began slowly to contract, tearing as it went. The guard cried out once and then shut his teeth tight together.

Horne said, "You're just wasting your time, Lurgh. You won't get him to talk that way."

"Shut up," snarled Fife. "He'll talk or we'll tear him to pieces. Go on, Lurgh, tear him!"

Horne shook his head. "You're smart enough, Fife, but you don't know men. This one's all angry and nerved up to die and he isn't going to tell us anything. Why? Because he figures he'll die anyway and the hell with us. On the other hand, if he had a choice—"

"What kind of a choice?"

"A choice of life or death. If he doesn't talk, he dies. If he does talk, he lives. Don't be a stubborn fool, Fife. What's one Vellae against a chance for home and freedom?"

Fife looked around at the others.

One of the nine-foot giants blinked his large mild eyes and said, "I think the human is right."

There were no dissenting voices,

For the second time Fife mastered himself. "We agree. If the man talks he lives."

Lurgh sighed and removed his hand.

Horne said to the guard, "Well?"

He watched while the man's hard resolve crumbled away now that its foundation was removed. There was nothing, he thought, more weakening than hope.

"I can start you off easy," he

said, "by telling you we know Ardric is alive. We were fighting him only a day or two ago."

"Fighting?" the guard said. "They kept that secret enough. I know Ardric was gone—"

He took a deep breath and plunged.

"Ardric has been working in the Project ever since he came back to Skereth."

A savage thrill, almost of triumph sprang up in Horne. He looked at the others and said, in a thin harsh voice like a cutting blade, "We won't have to go to Rillah."

"Right here in the Project?" said Fife. "Doing what?"

"Well," said the man, "he's a spaceman and doesn't know a thing about the Project, but he is used to giving orders. So his father put him in charge of the Whole Project guard. Now he tells us how to do the work we've been doing for years."

Fife was figuring time. Finally he said grudgingly, "We all escaped before that, so you may be telling the truth."

"I think he is," said Horne. "If a man wanted to hide for a while, where would he find a better place than this?"

He bent down beside the guard. "I want Ardric. How can I get him?"

The man looked at him, startled by the cold intensity of his manner. "I don't think there is any way," he said. "He lives and works in the Administration Center—the heart of the Project. Even with my uniform and equipment you wouldn't have much chance to get near him, and even if you did they'd kill you before you could get away. These others—" He shook his head. "No chance at all."

"Are you sure of that?" Horne said. "Think hard. And remember what depends on it."

Sweat came out on the man's face. He was more frightened now than when he had been sure he was going to die.

"I don't know," he said desperately. "Please, I can't tell you a way if there isn't one."

"Try," said Horne. "Take plenty of time."

The man's face became agonized with effort.

"If you go down through the access galleries you'll meet other guards, and you'll have to pass through many levels where work is still going on and there are even more guards to watch the slaves. So that's impossible. You couldn't get past without being seen and challenged. But if you went through the Project itself—"

"Behind the doors?"

"Yes—but listen, if you got all

the way to a main-ganglion relay station and from there to the control center in Administration, there would still be only a handful of you against the Project guards, and any slave caught in Administration would be shot on sight. So there isn't any way I can see—"

"Just a minute," Horne said. "Main ganglion? What are the Vellae building in this mountain?"

An expression of fright crept into the man's face, against his will but too strong to be denied.

"A brain," he said. "The hell and all of a damned great brain."

## CHAPTER VIII

FOR A MINUTE there was complete silence in the gallery. Then Fife said, wonderingly,

"A brain? A living, thinking brain?"

"Not living, like that," said the guard. "It's a giant electronic computer, one of those that can calculate so far beyond human powers that they're called 'brains'. This one is the biggest there ever was!"

Yso said slowly, "No wonder they killed my father. No wonder they'd kill anybody who tried to get Skereth into the Federation."

She looked desperately from Horne to Ewan and then to the aliens and Fife's clever unhuman

face.

"We thought it was just their profits and power they were afraid of losing, but it's more. My father thought so and he was right. If Skereth entered the Federation, the Vellae leaders couldn't hope to hide what they're doing here. They'd go to prison for it, as a menace to the peace of the galactic community."

Fife shook his head. "But why?"

Ewan said grimly, "Federation law forbids any world or government or private interest to construct an electronic calculating brain of more than a certain capacity. They can have as many brains as they need to conduct their business, but they must not be linked together and must not exceed the fixed limit. If they do, the Federation considers it an act of war. It will take punitive action against any world, in the Federation or out of it, that endangers the rest of the galaxy by building such a dangerous thing."

The full significance of what the guard had said more or less had escaped Horne, who was a spaceman and not much concerned with the complexities of galactic law outside his own sphere. But he was impressed by the reactions of Yso and Ewan, who were openly horror-struck.

He asked, "Why is it so danger-

ous? A weapon I could understand, but an electronic brain—"

"It *is* a weapon," Ewan said. "Potentially the most dangerous of all. Look—a spear is an extension of a man's hand and far more dangerous, isn't it? Well, an electronic brain is an extension of a man's mind—really the combined minds of many men. Theoretically it could be extended to such proportions that the men who controlled it would be practically invincible. They would have all weapons, all strategy, all propaganda, all psychology, ready for instant use. One whole section of the brain this large, for instance, could be put to working out new equations for advanced weapons systems, leaving the rest of it free to solve the problems of attack on all levels, figure the probability curve of the enemy's movements—everything. And all the time new data would be added making the brain even more powerful. I don't say it could never be smashed, but it would be a tough proposition, and there wouldn't be much left of the planet after it was over."

He clenched his hands and beat them gently together in a gesture of sheer desperation.

"If we don't succeed here—if we don't manage somehow to get proof to the Federation government—Skereth and probably this



whole part of the galaxy will be involved in such a war that—”

“Sssh!” said Chell suddenly, bounding up. “Another cone. A bigger cone, I think.”

The guard stiffened in the grip of the hairy ones. “I didn’t make the routine communications check. Now they’re coming to see what happened to me. It’ll be a two-man cone, and armed.”

“You treacherous human,” said Fife, and moved in.

Horne knocked him aside. “We didn’t give him much chance to make his check, did we? Anyway, we still need him. Alive and unhurt, you understand? Now get him out of sight around that bend.”

He handed Ewan the gun he had taken from the guard. “See that nothing happens to him. Yso, I’ll need you, and I’ll need Chell.”

He began in great haste to pull on the guard’s red uniform. Yso said, “What are you going to do?”

“Put on a little play for them.” He paused briefly, frowning. “It’ll be dangerous. We’ll likely all get killed. If you and Chell don’t want to risk—”

Yso said, “Let’s not waste time, Horne. What do you want us to do?”

He told her while he was climbing into the cone. The idea had come to him very quickly, incomplete at first but taking on a larg-

er and fuller shape as he thought about it and considered what might be done afterward if it did what he hoped it would do.

Chell added the finishing touch.

“Use the arms,” he said. “See? They’re both tools and weapons.”

Horne saw now what he had not noticed before—a pair of jointed armlike appendages ending in iron claws, folded in under the rim of the metal cone.

“They can carry a current,” Chell said. “I know because I have seen slaves burned, and shocked, and even killed. So be careful. Pleasse?”

HE BOBBLED swiftly back to Yso. Horne shut the canopy and worked the grav-shields to right the cone. He started the tiny compressed-air propulsion unit and the cone moved sedately at the pace of a man walking, back along the gallery the way it had come.

When the two-man cone rounded a curve, the guards in it saw Chell coming first of all, a huge furry green ball carrying Yso in three of his tentacles. Yso appeared to be unconscious, hanging limp with her yellow hair falling down like a banner and the scanty blue streamer fluttering from her waist. With his two spare tentacles Chell made gestures of warding off Horne

in his cone, who was apparently herding him along with his burden. The powerful claw-handed arms were extended now from the cone, threatening him, and one was red-hot and close enough to his fur to make Chell's gestures of alarm authentic enough. Even so, he was careful to keep as much of his bulk as possible between Horne and the others, to hide him.

Horne, keeping his face turned away, said over the speaker attachment,

"I found this slave and the woman in the gallery. They attacked me and I was forced to subdue them—the woman may be badly hurt. I'm glad you came—will you get out and see to her? I'll control the slave. It's vitally important that we take her alive to Ardric."

The two guards in the cone were staring fascinated at the white skinned girl in Chell's grasp.

"Who is she?" one of them asked. "And how did she get into the gallery?"

"I don't know how she got in," Horne said, "but I'm pretty sure I know who she is. I've seen her picture. That's Morivenn's daughter."

"Morivenn's daughter?" said the guard at the controls. "Here in the Project? You're right, this is vital!"

He set the cone down with a thump. The propulsion-unit died. The canopy opened and both men

jumped down and ran toward Yso.

Instantly Chell dropped her gently to the floor, let go of her, and flung his tentacles around the nearest man, who bellowed in alarm. The other one reached for his gun and shouted for Horne to do something about Chell. Horne touched two controls in swift succession. The cone shot forward several feet and a great iron hand reached out and gripped the man's arm with its amazingly flexible fingers. The gun splashed a brief fury against the rocky ceiling and then dropped as the man was hauled off his feet and held dangling.

Chell must have called to his friends, because they came swiftly and one took hold of the second man so that Horne could let go of him. Yso looked up excitedly at Horne and cried, "It worked! Now what?"

Horne neutralized the cone and jumped down. "Now we finish the questioning and make our plans, and they'd better be good because we won't have any chance to change them later on."

"We had better hurry, too," said Chell, "before yet another cone comes searching after these two."

They joined Fife and the other slaves and Ewan. Horne bent over their first captive.

"Now," he said, "I want to know about those locked doors and the

passages behind them."

From there on the actual planning did not take long. It was a wildly improbable venture and, Horne thought, probably foredoomed to failure, but it offered the only possibility he could see and no one disputed him or suggested anything better.

The locks of the iron doors were controlled by a frequency key in the guard's cone. The doors actually were access hatches for maintenance and repair in the labyrinthine corridors of the Project—the brain that already required most of a mountain to contain its cells and ganglia—vast memory banks, computing units, comparison centers, data analyzers, all the components of the human brain except the part from which man derives his emotions, his personality and his humanness.

With the feeling of one about to make an uncanny entrance into the very tissues of a quasi-living entity, Horne activated the frequency key and opened one of the doors into the brain.

It had been carefully selected from the guard's information. Now the three Project men, bound and gagged, were pulled into the chamber beyond the hatch, where they would not be discovered too soon. Horne turned the small cone over to Ewan, who would have use for

it.

Yso was already at the controls of the larger one, with Fife beside her. Chell and his two comrades would go with them. All the rest would come with Horne.

There was not, Horne thought, much to choose between the two groups in the probability of survival. Horne and his group were to make their way secretly to the Administration Center and attack from within. Yso, Ewan and Fife, and the three from Chorann, were to make their way openly into the lower galleries where the slaves were working, rouse them to action, knock out the guards, and attack the Administration Center from without. They hoped to get, not only Ardic, but the brain itself. Then, if they died, they might at least wreck the brain before they went.

"Make it good," Horne said to Ewan.

"You, too," said Ewan grimly.

Horne glanced at Yso, dazzling in her garish finery. He smiled. "You're just what we need to lead a crusade," he said. "Give it to them, Morivenn's daughter!"

She nodded, shaking back her yellow hair. Fife smiled to himself and played hungrily with the weapon keys on the board before him.

Horne held out his hand to

Chell, who wrapped the tip of a tentacle around it.

"Okay," said Horne. "Let's go."

He nodded to Lurgh, the purple gargoyle, and stepped in through the hatch door, and the whole weird crew padded after him into the secret corridors of the brain.

## CHAPTER IX

ON THE FAR SIDE of the chamber there was an arched opening showing a pale glow of light. Horne passed through it and found himself on a narrow spidery catwalk that stretched away ahead of him apparently into infinity, one long straight thread among a maze of cables.

After the dim rock gallery, the suffused light and complex perspectives of this place confused Horne's eyes and made him dizzy. He looked upward for comfort to the smooth round roof of the bore, but it was too close above his head and it, too, slipped away.

So he looked down.

The catwalk hung above a huge transparent tube that was the heart of the circular web of cables. Inside the tube was a thick mass of wires in many colors, like the schematic diagram of a bundle of nerve fibres. This, according to the guard, was one of the main ganglia, serving this whole portion

of the brain. Just under where Horne stood the thick vari-colored bundle separated into two and split off in opposite directions along curving corridors.

Below the tube, a long way down, was the bottom of the round bore.

Horne looked over his shoulder at Lurgh, who was standing hesitantly with one big clawed foot on the catwalk, as though he didn't like the idea of trusting his knotty bulk to this frail strand.

"Think how much worse it'll be for your nine foot friends," he said. "But I think we'd better space ourselves out. Don't follow too close and don't have two heavy ones right together."

He started out along the narrow way, hanging tight to the hand ropes.

The catwalk was not rigid. He felt the sway as Lurgh came on behind him. The cables, woven of some neutral, non-magnetic plastic, creaked and sprang. Horne set his teeth and walked on, trying not to think of how far it was to the floor and the inevitable alarms that would be set off if they all came crashing down onto the tube.

It was hard to tell how far you had come or how far you had yet to go. Horne looked back once or twice and saw his little band of all-sized, all-colored, all-shaped monstrosities strung out behind

him, stepping with infinite care, the two hairy giants separated by large intervals and bent almost on all fours. Behind them all the catwalk ended at the arch from which they had come. The next time he looked, the arch had dwindled into the pinpoint nothingness of distance.

There was something hypnotic and horrifying about it, as though you had got into a spatial warp without beginning or end and would go on through eternity until the whole cosmos collapsed and prepared to recycle.

He was glad when he came upon a branching sideline where a slim bundle of fibres separated from the parent stem and curved off into a huge chamber. There was a branch of the catwalk, too, and he could have gone into the chamber, but he only stopped long enough to see that it was crammed with banks of tubes and miles of circuiting. There was a constant flickering of little lights and a soft buzzing and clicking like somebody muttering busily to himself.

They passed several of these huge chambers. Horne thought how many more there must be in the bulk of the mountain, how deep and far the labyrinthine twinings of these nerve paths and chambered cells must reach on all sides of him. *And they're building it still bigger,* he thought. *And think what men*

*like Ardric can do with power.*

He wondered how Yso and Ewan and the aliens were doing with their side of it.

He was sure of one thing. If he couldn't do both, it was more important to smash this great lurking giant of the mountain than to clear his own name. In the long run, he supposed, the one would follow the other anyway, even if he wasn't around to see it.

Out of the hypnotic web before him emerged an archway much like the one they had left behind. This would be the main-ganglion relay-center the guard had spoken of.

Horne lifted his hand in warning. In utter silence he moved forward and the others followed him like ghosts.

This arch had a door in it. Horne pushed it open.

THERE WAS A BIG circular room with panels all around it. Two men, obviously engineers and wearing no uniforms, were going about their business of seeing that the impulse streams were flowing properly in this division of the brain, that there was no block or overload. They looked up startled as Horne came through the door and one of them said,

"Is there trouble along the line there? The instruments didn't show—"

"Yes," Horne said, "there's trouble. But not quite the kind you mean, Lurgh!"

He pulled the stolen gun from the holster of his stolen uniform and said to the engineers, "Stand perfectly still and you won't be harmed."

They stood still and their eyes grew big and their faces white. Lurgh and the others poured through the doorway.

"Is this a slave rising?" one of them said.

Horne said devoutly, "I hope so."

The man made a brave but perfectly futile rush for a communicator. One of the nine-foot giants picked him up and slapped him on the side of the head, and there was no further movement from him.

The other man resigned himself to being bound. While Lurgh saw to this Horne was opening other hatch-doors. Three of them gave onto main tubes like the one they had just come from. The fourth opened onto a lift.

At the bottom of the lift was the central room of Administration.

Horne took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "we might as well go."

They crowded in and Horne pushed the button. The round chamber dropped with vertiginous

swiftness down the shaft.

When Horne heard the first whine of the air cushion he said, "Come out with a rush and arm yourselves as soon as you can."

Lurgh said, "What if the others do not come?"

"Then," said Horne, "we'll just have to hold on until they do."

The lift slowed and stopped and the door slid open.

There was a narrow corridor in front of the lift, with rows of identical doors on either side of it like the lift hall in an office building. There was nobody in it. Hall led the way swiftly to the end of it.

Here a round space perhaps three hundred feet in diameter and almost as high had been hollowed out of the very heart of the mountain. Buildings of steel and glass filled all the circular space except for the center and the streets that radiated from it, dividing the buildings into separate blocks.

The streets, Horne knew, connected with the entrances from Rillah and the private base where the Vellae ships landed with slaves, and also with the galleries and work centers around the periphery of the brain. It was from one of these streets that the other slaves, led by Yso and Ewan, were supposed to pour in to the attack.

There was no sign of them yet. But some sort of alarm had roused

the center. Behind the glass window-walls of the buildings technicians at the many input-output devices of the brain were turning from their work and peering out into the plaza. Here there was a noise and a running of men—technicians and scientists hurrying to cover, red-uniformed guards coming from various directions and disappearing along one particular street to Horne's left.

A number of them were coming out of a building with a sign that said, Project Guard Office. It was not too far around the plaza, to Horne's right.

All Horne's muscles tightened and the old hate burned up in him so strong that he felt invincible.

"Ardric's there," he said to his companions. "Let's get him."

He ran out across the plaza.

THERE WAS a sudden cessation of movement among the people there as they became aware of him in his red uniform, and then saw the group that followed him. Somebody shouted in a voice of panic that the slaves were already here. The unarmed, non-uniformed men began to run away, spreading wild confusion around the plaza, and the guards stopped going wherever they were headed and turned to shoot at Horne's little mob. But they could not fire

effectively for the moment without killing a lot of their own people, and in the meantime Horne had reached the door of the Guard Office and pushed it violently open and gone through it into the place beyond, with the aliens pouring in after him.

The Guard communication center was here. Operators bent tensely over their instruments, listening to a bedlam of voices, transmitting the orders and instructions given by their chief. The chief, wearing the red guard uniform but otherwise unchanged since the last time Horne had seen him aboard the *Vega Queen*, was a man with a clean-cut, intelligent face, too thin and cruel around the mouth and too flint-hard in the eyes, not trying now to be pleasant but full of the alert anger of a man attacked.

Ardric.

Horne sprang forward.

Ardric looked up. Horne had a brief glimpse of him, startled, forming a name with his lips, reaching for his gun. Then he was toppling over among the astonished operators and Horne went with him, his hands, his knees, his whole body savagely engaged in paying Ardrick some small bit of what he owed him.

They rolled and thrashed in fierce silence on the floor, among the

frantic legs of the operators and the leaping forms of the aliens who were subduing them. There was a frightful noise. Voices shouted from the communicators asking what was happening. Lurgh picked up a microphone and roared in his hoarse, heavy voice, "We have the Center! You're caught between us—" and he howled his triumph and his hate at the unseen guards who were fighting his fellow-slaves somewhere in the outer galleries.

Horne, only dimly aware of these extraneous things, thought that Lurgh was exulting too soon. But he didn't care. All he cared about was that at last he had Ardric in the grip of his two hands. Ardric was fighting back. Horne's mouth was full of blood and his face was cut and his body was bruised, but that was all right too. It was good. And he had Ardric's neck finally in the bend of his forearm and was pressing back, pressing back—

Two enormous hairy hands opened his grip as easily as if he had been a child. A second pair of hands extracted Ardric and held him, half conscious, the skin of his cheeks already mottled blue. Horne looked up into the faces of the giants, and one of them said,

"You wanted this one alive. Remember?"

Horne staggered up, still dazed.

"Yes" he said. "Yes, see that he doesn't get away." The communications center was a shambles. The operators were wounded, dead, or escaped. About half the aliens were armed now and the others were searching the inner rooms for weapons.

The guards outside began their counter-attack.

The great front window burst in a shower of glass. Instantly there was a scramble for cover. Red-uniformed shapes poured in, firing as they came. Horne, behind part of the communications equipment, fired back and so did every alien who had a gun. Searing beams flashed and cracked. The room was filled in seconds with smoke and a smell of burning. The slaves who had been searching the inner rooms came back with guns and fired from the shelter of the doorways. But they were using unfamiliar weapons and the guards were trained fighting-men, and there were more of them. Ardric, pinned down by the great bulk of the hairy alien, said with vicious satisfaction, "My men will kill every damn one of you." And Horne knew he was right.

Where were Yso and Ewan and the other slaves? What had happened in the outer galleries?

If they didn't come soon, they wouldn't need to come at all.



HE FIRED at the red uniforms, and choked on the smoke and the stench of dying.

There came then a deep far sound like wind or the voice of the sea. It grew and grew swiftly, and the guards heard it and became irresolute and the fire slackened.

Half a dozen one-man cones and two larger ones spewed in a line out of the street to the left of the plaza. The guards attacking Horne's force ran out to meet them, waving their arms. Then more men in red uniforms came running out of the street. Some of them were wounded. Others kept stopping every few feet to turn and fire and then run again. They mingled with the other guards and they all milled around for a moment and the cones hovered overhead. The two armed cones fired back also along the street.

A beam shot out from between the buildings and knocked one of them reeling back, its grav shields fused. There was burst of sporadic firing both in the air and on the ground. Then the red-uniformed men broke and ran and the cones followed them, and out from the street came the two-man cone with Yso at the controls, her yellow hair flying and Fife crouched beside her over the weapon-panel, firing like a demon. After her came a string of wobbly cones manned by

creatures of every sort sufficiently humanoid to fit them, and a flying cluster of green furry balls with weapons in their tentacles.

On the street below them came the army of the slaves, an outworld legion of incredible, beautiful, ugly, grotesque, laughable, horrifying beings, welded into a vast brotherhood by their common need for freedom and their hatred of the Vellae.

They poured like a river into the plaza and widened and filled it, and the red uniforms were swept away.

Horne and his few remaining followers ran out to meet them, and the nine-foot one carried Ardric with him, helpless in the grip of those mighty hands.

Chell came and dropped down over them. "Better take off that red suit, Horne," he said. "These ones are in no mood to ask who's inside it before they kill you. Where's Lurgh? It was his voice that turned the tide. Some of us could hear him bellowing over the guards' radios that you had taken the Administration Center, and the guards began to waver, and that did it."

The purple gargoyle raised his head, made even more hideous by burns and blood, and smiled ruefully.

"It wasn't exactly true," he

said:

"It worked, though," Chell said. He wrapped his tentacles joyously around Horne and the gargoyle. Then he said sadly, "Ewan's dead. He brought down the first guard and got the rising started, but they killed him."

Ardric spoke, his face white with fury and the fear of the crowding unhuman bodies, furred and scaled, hairy and naked, and the baleful unhuman eyes that looked at him hungering for his life.

"You'll all die," he said. "The alarm is out. The Vellae are already on the way with every man they can raise." He looked bitterly at Horne. "You've cheated me twice now. You were supposed to die in the wreck. Then when I heard you were coming to Rillah I left the Project to make sure you didn't. The third time you won't get away."

"In that case," Horne said, "you won't either. Because from now on you will be as close to me as my right arm."

Yso's cone was hovering overhead, unable to land in the milling crowd. The canopy was open. She shouted down at him, wild-eyed and half hysterical, "It's done, Horne!"

He shouted back, "Not quite. Use your amplifier there and tell them not to smash everything yet

—tell them to go and guard the entrances against the Vellae. Then get me a technician."

"What for?" asked Fife.

And Horne said, "We're going to destroy the brain. And the only way I know to do it is to ask it how."

## CHAPTER X

TIME HAD PASSED. Horne didn't know how much. Only a few minutes probably, but everything seemed to take years. In the plaza outside groups of slaves still stalked and shambled and hopped among the broken glass, looking for someone to kill. The bulk of them were massed in the two main entrance tunnels from Rillah and the port. Fighting was already joined.

In the room, one of many in this operations center where data and problems were fed to the brain and the answers received, a white-faced technician hung over his input-output mechanisms. It had taken a little hard persuasion to make him code the question—*How can you be most quickly destroyed?* He had pointed out that "you" had no meaning for the brain and they had pointed out that he had better find a way of phrasing that would have meaning for it.

He had done so and the problem

had been fed in. Now they waited—Horne Yso, and Chell, and Ardric securely shackled and guarded. Far away in its mighty vaults and chambers, the brain coldly pondered its own destruction.

Horne stared out the window and worried.

A very long-legged creature with snow-white skin and a little crest of horns came leaping across the plaza and into the building. Horne went to meet him.

"I am to say," the creature told him, "that the Vellae have many men, and these we could fight, but that also they have very heavy weapons that fill the halls with flame, and these we cannot fight. I am to say that unless other ways of escape are found we will all die, and that they should be found very soon. *Very soon.*"

Horne indicated the engineering office across the plaza where Fife and a selected group of slaves were extracting information from charts and some reluctant men. "That's being done. Tell them to hold out as long as they can."

Yso called him and he went back into the office. The machine was typing out a bewildering mass of symbols. Horne said, "Read it."

The technician began to laugh hysterically. "A nuclear bomb of 80 megaton capacity placed in the position represented by the fig-

ures—"

Ardric too began to laugh. "You might as well give up, Horne. You couldn't destroy the brain if you had all the time in the world, and you don't have. We've got you trapped."

Horne said quietly to the technician, "Try again. Substitute another word for *destroyed*—something meaning maximum damage."

The technician hesitated. Chell reached out a couple of tentacles and he flinched and began hurriedly to punch out a tape.

It clicked into the machine and again they waited.

The first stragglers came into the plaza, retreating ahead of the line of battle.

Fife came out of the engineering section with a rolled-up chart in his hand. He came running. "There are other ways out," he said. "Look here." He flung the chart open on the floor. "Some of the original borings, where they first started work on the brain, were left open for emergency exits. They blocked the others." He pointed. "See?"

"That's fine," said Horne, "except that we'd have to go through the brain again to get to them."

Fife looked out the window. The groups of stragglers were growing and coming faster. "I don't see that we have much choice," he said.

The machine was click-clacking a message. Chell laid the end of one bright-red tentacle like a necklace around the technician's throat. The man looked agonized, but resigned.

"It's a list of critical relays and safety switches to be opened, and the precise increase in voltage necessary to burn out all circuits."

A shiver went through Horne. There was something so unhuman, uncanny, in the icy calmness with which the mighty computer had calculated its own destruction, on order. But after all, though it was called a brain, it was without will or personality. It computed, nothing more—and computed its own destruction as passionlessly as anything else.

"Get to it," Horne said. "Fife, see that he has all the help he needs and send messengers to the tunnels to tell them to start falling back. Chell—"

Chell wrapped his tentacles around Ardic. Horne picked up the chart in one hand and took hold of Yso with the other. "Let's go."

THE SLAVES were coming faster and faster now out of the two streets leading to the main entrances. Many of them were hurt. There was a confused din and roar, punctuated with ominous boomings. Fife and the technician, with whatever help they had gathered

up, had disappeared.

Ardic began to struggle fiercely. "You can't get out. Look at them, they're running! We'll hunt every one of you down—"

Chell tightened his tentacles and Ardic gasped and was silent.

"Which way?" asked Yso, pale and tired now that she had come down from the peak of emotion after the battle.

Horne tried to orient himself by the chart. "Behind that block of buildings."

He began to run, still holding Yso and urging her along. Chell came after with Ardic.

They passed down the street and into the space behind the Administration Center, where the living rock of the mountain stood in a curved wall. There was a massive door in it. Horne pushed it open and stepped through onto a balcony about halfway up the side of a huge cavern, so unexpected that he was momentarily stunned by the sensation of the ground falling out from under his feet.

This was the occipital opening where all the nerves of the mountain-high cranium channelled together to the primary control center. From every level the glistening tubes with their cores of bright bundled wire came, running out of their holes in the rock and des-

cending in orderly rows to their ultimate terminals.

Yso caught her breath and cried out. "Look!"

In one, two, then three of the tubes, fire flashed like a bolt of lightning, vanishing into the rock. Behind it the bright tube became opaque, blackened, dead.

Horne looked at the chart again. "One on each side," he said, and pointed. "There, and there. These lower levels, naturally, were built first, and the main ganglia on this level connect with passages to these old outlets. Good."

He left Yso with Chell and ran back to face the growing confusion in the plaza.

The business of falling back in the main tunnels had become more of a business of running frantically away from the Vellae weapons that were too powerful to face. Horne got them started down the right street. Pretty soon he had helpers. Lurgh joined him, and then Fife. "We wrecked the controls," Fife said, "after he opened the switches, so they can't stop what's been started." He rubbed his hands together, grinning. "I thought he might be cheating, so I made him show me the limit switches on the generator leads. I broke those, too."

The last of the slaves ran across the plaza. After them, close on

their heels, came the first of the Vellae. Fife said, "It's time to go."

They ran with the last of the slaves, firing behind them as they went.

In the great cavern now the balcony on both sides was filled with a grotesque stream of creatures hurrying into the two galleries. The place had taken on the eerie look of an inferno. Fire flashed and ran in the tubes, and now in some places the plastic tubing itself had begun to melt and burn. The cavern was thick with choking smoke, through which the frantic slaves crowded toward the tunnels like demons dreamed up by some later-day Durer for a modernistic hell. Chell was hovering, holding Ardic, and another of his breed had picked up Yso and was keeping her safe from the trampling rush.

Horne coughed and fired at a red uniform dimly glimpsed in the street outside. "You did a good job," he told Fife. "Too damn good."

"Well," said Fife, "it's too late now. If we live, I'll see you in Rillah!"

He ran off along the right hand gallery. Horne took the left. And they fled into the tunnels of the dying brain.

They ran, the unhuman, the semi-human, the light-footed and

the huge, the fleet and the clumsy, along the narrow swaying catwalks. And around them and under them the brain died in convulsions of smoke and fire and arcing flame.

The bundled wires in the tubes heated as current from the unchecked generators poured into them, through the broken gateways of protected devices that no longer functioned. They heated until the insulation burned away and the fusing fire raced along the slender filaments. It raced through every branching nerve-path into the cells and chambers where the brain did its remembering, its computing and comparing, its almost human learning and associating. Circuits fused, arcs of blue fire leaped over the panels and the tube banks, holocausts of energy were released to fill the rocky chambers with destruction.

Horne ran, clinging to the hand-rail because he could no longer see, along the wildly swaying catwalk. Now and again, as they passed the mouth of some burning chamber, he could see through the swirls of smoke ahead the weird forms of the slaves running, leaping, shambling, striving in a desperate attempt to outrace the destruction that was following with such deadly swiftness on their heels.

Because now the galleries themselves were burning. The plastic

tubes, the network of suspension cables that held them, the very catwalk, were melting and crumbling behind them in the smoke and heat.

The Vellae who had followed them into the galleries were caught in that swift-racing destruction.

**H**ORNE HEARD the echo of a shattering explosion and felt the whole mountain shake, as though it felt suddenly the insecurity of its hollowed and honeycombed mass. A very great panic came over Horne and he ran with the fire at his heels and the mountain shivering uneasily over his head, and the smoke strangling in his lungs. Then there was a rocky corridor full of smoke but without fire, and a small barred opening through which another light shone—the light of sunset.

They cleared the bars away and fought madly through the hole out onto the mountain's flanks, while the mountain itself rocked and groaned around them and echoed with dim cracking sounds. The brain had calmly plotted the basis of its own destruction. Fife's reckless release of power had augmented it. The work of the Vellae themselves in constructing the physical housing of the brain and leaving little more than the shell of a

mountain, was finishing it. It felt, and sounded, as though the galleries were collapsing inward by levels upon the huge hollow center of Administration.

Horne and his alien-bodied comrades ran, in the clear air and the sunset light, down the lower slopes toward the safety of the plain, and above them the face of the mountain was changed as the upper galleries collapsed.

Only a handful of the Vellae had escaped. Most of them, including Ardrick's father, had stayed in the Administration Center in a frantic attempt to save some part of the vast thing they had labored on for so long, and they had been trapped in the spreading fires and falling rock that followed the explosion of the overloaded generators. Those few who made their way out were caught and held by the slaves.

Horne and Fife joined forces and looked out over Rillah, a fine white city stained purple and crimson and sullen gold under the sunset clouds. And they could see that the people of Rillah were coming out to stare up at the mountain, veiled now in dust and smoke but still quaking.

Ardrick, still shackled but standing on his own feet with Chell hovering close to him, looked with bitter eyes at the ruin behind him,

and he said to Horne, "Why couldn't you have died along with Morivenn?"

Horne said truthfully, "I don't know."

He looked at the city. There was a Federation agent there who had come all this way to get the man responsible for the wreck of the *Vega Queen*. Horne would see that he got him.

But there was more, much more. The brain was smashed and so were the Vellae. The slaves were free, free to tell the Federation all that had happened to them, free to tell all Skereth what kind of men had ruled them. Morivenn's party would be in power now and Skereth could be brought peacefully into the Federation, ending the exploitation and monopoly of an outworn system.

He reached out and took Yso's arm and drew her closer to him. He thought that after other things were out of the way he would have some personal matters to settle with her.

"Come on," he said to Fife, "let's go."

They began to move, the strange motley army of grotesque and alien shapes, across the plain toward Rillah in the sunset, and the people of the city watched them come, awestruck, silent, and afraid.

THE END



"Its pictures don't do it justice."



# THE FALL OF ARCHY HOUSE

*by*

*Tom W. Harris*

**Television is a swell way of projecting ideas to an audience. But Archy created chaos when he used it to project real live monsters!**

**F**OR OVER TWO WEEKS, the projections were a national emergency, and the nation got pretty sore at Archy House.

Archy was on camera when it happened. He always closed the Home Hour in person, partly because nobody else did it quite as well, partly because it flattered the audience to see him.

His delivery was almost shaken, the night the thing happened, by the appearance of Otto Kahler, chief engineer, just out of camera-range, his hair in his eyes and a wildness about his mouth.

Arch closed his patter smoothly, set a smile through fadeout, and turned to Kahler.

"What's up, Otto? You look like a ghost that saw a ghost." He let annoyance enter his voice. He was surrounded by the best men money could buy, and sometimes they ran around like children.

"The scrambler blew," said Otto. "Somebody spilled a pail of water

on it."

In an office a phone began ringing. "Mr. House," somebody shouted, "it's the White House calling."

Archy gave Otto a shove. "Dammit, man, switch on the auxiliary. Do I have to tell you?" Otto just stood there as Archy turned and yelled into the confusion off the set, "Tell Washington I'll be right with 'em."

His eye swept the studio. "Where's June Manning?"

Even in this tight moment, his breath gave the familiar balloon-lurch as Full-Projection Studio's top writer glided from the directors' studio in her blue sheathe gown. Her wheat-blond hair was dressed in the latest style, a yard-long, loose-braided hank slung richly over her shoulder; and her face was part cherubic, part perverse.

Another phone began ringing.

"June, I want a 30-second yak to give the viewers. You have 90 seconds to get it on idiot cards;



I'm going on with it right after the station break. The scramblers failed. Gimme something soothing to say. Got it?"

She nodded and marched off. Otto cleared his throat. Archy spun. "What are you waiting for? Get switched to auxiliary! We've got projections prancing around living

rooms in every suburb in the country."

Another phone was ringing. "General Cox for Mr. House," somebody yelled. "Calling from Hawaii."

Archy wished these jackasses would all drop dead. He shook Otto.

"I tried the auxiliary," said Otto. "It's out."

"Holy volts," said Archy.

For the first time in his life he felt desperate. A cool head and a habit of never being wrong had got him where he was — founder and top banana of Full-Projection, sole owner of three TV networks using the revolutionary 3-D devices perfected by Otto Kahler and patented by Archy. In the present emergency, he tried to keep his head still cool and continue to never be wrong.

A stagehand was running a phone out onto the set. Waiting, Archy snapped instructions at Otto — put half the staff to trying to get the scramblers operating, set the other half to slapping together an emergency machine. Otto dashed off and the phone was slapped into Archy's hand.

"Yes, Ben," he said assuringly to the President of the United States. "What can I do for you?"

"You can get those projections out of my living room," snapped the president. "They're still doing their acts from the circus show — jugglers, acrobats, an animated cartoon. What happened?"

"Don't worry, Pops. An experimental commercial goofed. Stay tuned; we'll have the scramblers on in ten minutes."

"You'd better," crackled President Conklin. "I have guests —

this could be an international incident. And don't call me Pops."

"Sit tight. And now excuse me, Ben, I'm going on the air. Just keep the projections near the set, within scrambler range."

He was on. They used the conventional flatscreen cameras, and June's script was as smooth as if she'd worked all day on it . . . as smooth as her satiny shoulders and not-quite-uncovered bust. It explained that due to uncontrollable circumstances scrambler-power was temporarily off.

"Our advice is, stay calm," Archy read smoothly. "The projections are not real people. They are harmless. They are merely images of people, just as in old-fashioned flat TV, except that they are projected into your home in full dimensions. Even with no scrambler to dissipate the electromagnetic configuration of which they are composed, they will not last long.

"They are held together, energized, by the energy beamed from our studios through your set. Without that power they will vanish, probably within a few minutes."

Reassured by what he had just read, Archy took more phone calls.

The general in Hawaii told him the barracks were full of Pixie Owens projections, Bikini-clad, and military discipline was shattered.

The mayor of New York report-

ed that Central Park was teeming with Wild West Theater projections, and armadillos in the streets had jammed all traffic.

PRESIDENT Conklin made a furious repeat call. The Russian consulate had sent a stiff note protesting the "degenerate practical joke" perpetrated on a Soviet diplomat attending Conklin's soiree.

The skipper of a battleship said his men proposed tossing all projections overboard, and he wanted to know if this would constitute murder.

Archy said it wouldn't, instructed his staff to take no more calls, and went to find Otto. June went with him.

June was a person with a knack for making you think of something else no matter what crisis you were embroiled in. In the elevator, Archy slipped an arm around her. "I've got an idea," he whispered.

"I'll scream," she warned, "and this shaft is like a megaphone."

"That's not the idea — anyway, an elevator is too cramped. My idea is; let's get married when this is over."

"Hmmm." She twisted back provocatively. "I've got another idea — give me a raise and I might think about it."

"That's what you said the last three times, and now you're draw-

ing a thousand a week."

"And worth every buck of it."

"True, true. If I didn't pay you what you're worth, professionally, some other outfit would steal you."

"You think I'd pull out just for a raise?"

"You'd be nuts if you didn't. Look, June — if you married me, a thousand a week would be nothing — peanuts."

She laughed, throaty but tinkling, a brook flowing through chimes. "And you wonder why I won't marry you. My friend, I won't marry you until you figure out *why* I won't."

The elevator stopped before he could ask for explanations. They found Otto among his machines, seated at a table. There were sheets of paper on it. There was also a small, furry body.

"Okay, Otto — when do we get a scrambler on? I've got the great American public snowed, but I can't hold 'em forever."

"We just found the trouble," said Otto, brushing the hair off his forehead. "It's crazy." He picked up the furred object. "A mouse got into the auxiliary and shorted it."

"Number one," said Archy. "Tomorrow I fire the maintenance staff. Mice — in my studio! Number two — how soon can you have a scrambler going?"

"Fifteen minutes," said Otto

proudly.

"Make it ten. Buzz me in the studio. We'll cut right into the program."

Back in the elevator, Archy crowded. "That's it, Baby — Archy House in action, everything taken care of."

"No credit for Otto?"

"You kidding. Otto's smart enough to work for me, but I'm smart enough to hire him. So who's smartest?" He juggled the mouse in his hand, reflectively. "Without me, Otto'd be nowhere. Somebody else'd have his idea. The smart guys are the promoters, chick. Why not marry one?"

She snorted wordlessly. He tossed the mouse in his palm and suddenly swore.

"I hurt your feelings, promoter?"

"Look at this mouse!"

She eyed him quizzically.

"This mouse never crawled into any scrambler," said Archy. "It was stuck in there, dead, and I've been sabotaged. It has a broken neck."

The elevator stopped, the door slid back, and Archy's mind left the mouse. It was as though a mirror had popped up before him. He was staring at a nattily-dressed, cocky replica of himself.

"Don't worry about anything, Mac," said the projection. "I'll have things tight in a jiffy."

"My God," said June. "The

monitor sets were on. Projections must be all over the studio."

"Hi, chick," said the projection. "Come on up to the office; there's some things to talk about."

Archy swung. The blow slipped harmlessly through the projection's jaw.

"You're passe," said the projection. "Outmoded. Here, play with Andy. Come on, June."

Archy cannoned a kick at the cartoon armadillo. His foot passed through, trailing a filmy tatter which snapped back into Andy's body.

"Eat Teeny-Crunchy Peanut Butter, kids," sang Andy Armadillo.

Eight minutes later Otto rang the buzzer. June had the projections doing a show in an office; when the scrambler kicked on they vanished. But an hour after that the White House called Archy.

"You only nailed about ten percent of those characters of yours," shouted President Conklin. "The rest had wandered out of range — I mean the ones all over the country. What are you going to do about it?"

"Don't worry, pops. All under control . . . my best people are working on it."

"Under control? With seven Pixie Owenses strip-teasing on the White House lawn? You get down here, House, and bring your staff."

Conklin's receiver slammed before Archy could answer. He slowly rubbed his ear. "This is getting bad."

A WEEK LATER things were still bad. Archy, June and Otto were still in Washington, and the President had called another conference. Of all the projections, the one of himself distressed Archy the most. They were insufferably arrogant. One had tried to pilot the plane that took him to the capital. Dozens had congregated at Full-Projection Studios, issuing orders to the staff. Twice, one had talked his way into a Presidential conference. "The only way you can tell they aren't real," said a guard, "is to poke them. I should poke somebody coming to see the President?"

"Can't people tell they aren't me by the way they act?" Archy asked June. "Cheeky, bossy—OBVIOUSLY they aren't me."

"Obviously, huh?" said June. "Let's go, or we'll miss the conference."

President Conklin opened the discussion with general remarks.

"In the first place, the Attorney-General informs me that Mr. House is legally responsible for the behavior of these projections — they are his agents, insofar as they are beings; his possessions, insofar as they are things. If Mr.

House cannot rid the country of them, he is liable to extremely grave consequences."

"Hold on," blurted Archy, with a dark glance at Otto. "My master-scrambler was sabotaged. I can't be held responsible for that."

"Do you know who did it? Can you definitely prove it was sabotage?"

Archy reddened. "I can tell you I'll find out."

"Until you do, it's your responsibility. Now today we have two reports. Mr. Otto Kahler — a very capable man, and I understand he is the real inventor of the full-projection process — has discovered how the projections manage to survive although cut off from studio power. Also, he has some comments on their nature. Before we hear from him, there is a report from the Secretary of the Interior."

The Secretary was a bald, tired, paunchy man who reminded people of a banker. Perhaps because he had been a banker. He opened his mouth to begin.

*"Tell your mother,*

*"Tell your brother,*

*"Ain't no better*

*"Peanut butter!"*

The raspy song came from beneath the table. Archy dived under and out frisked an Andy Armidillo projection, natty in green breeches and prospector's hat.

The cartoon sat jauntily in the

middle of the table. "Say, kids," he addressed the group, "Teeny-Crunch Peaner Butter really has it. This peaner butter is like going to heaven. It's smooth yet —"

"Get out of here!" screamed Archy.

The Armidillo eyed him. "Look, Mac, I'm doing an act. I'm tired of being turned off." He began the commercial again.

The conference moved to another room. "Better chink the door," said Otto.

The Secretary of the Interior began anew. Archy listened closely; there would be a chance to trip this guy up.

"It's estimated that 500,000,000 projections are at large," said the secretary. Here are some things that have happened:

"Throngs of the cowboy projections are heading west. They get on horses and chase cattle. The horses buck them off, they climb right back on. Half the horses in the country are so crazed they'll be useless forever. Villain projections are hiding all over the nation. The cowboy hero projections are fighting the villains in a million bar-rooms. Fortunately they can't use real guns, but customers aren't convinced."

"Who cares about a bunch of drunks?" said Archy. Everybody scowled.

"The Pixie Owens projections I

needn't dwell on. They've caused thousands of auto wrecks just by appearing along highways."

"The clowns and jugglers have put the circuses out of business by invading at show time. The jugglers get into ping-pong tournaments, juggle the balls. Nobody can keep them out."

"The armadillo cartoons have bankrupt Teeny-Crunch Peanut Butter — nobody will buy it.

"The projections are claiming U.S. citizenship and the right to vote. The Archy projections are organizing them. They've horned into every village, town, city, state, and national governmental conclave.

"Projections hunt audiences. They have disrupted every stage show in the country. They put on shows in people's living rooms, in parks, in the middle of the street. A few got jobs with stock companies, in movies, and so on, but they can only play one part — the one they were doing for Full-Projection."

"I'm entitled to a percentage of their earnings," said Archy.

"They've all been fired," said Otto. "If the secretary is through — the report is beginning to border on the nature of the projections — perhaps I can make my report now."

PRESIDENT Conklin glanced at the Secretary, who nodded.

"I guess you know their mental properties," said Otto.

"Sort of monomaniacs. They're counterfeit humans, of course, but limited counterfeits. The configuration projected for any given actor is solely of the elements in that person which are involved in the part being played. Part of the neural patterns, synapses, so on — only a part, but complete circuits—are projected.

"This part is enough to allow a certain freedom of development, acquisition of new ideas, individuality. Basically a projection is a replica of the person being projected. Pixie, for instance, has never strip-teased on one of the shows..."

"I should hope not!" snuffed the Secretary.

"...but the projection Pixie does what the real Pixie has implicit in her nature. Our friend the armadillo, being only a cartoon, is different. About all he can do is repeat commercials.

"Physically, the projections eat no food. They are not quite solid—one couldn't pick up a coin or a hammer, but could handle a ping-pong ball or a fluff of cotton.

"They are somewhat plastic and slip through restricted openings. I saw one walk through a screen door, and I'm told they can get through keyholes. They can be temporarily broken up by physical means, but come right back togeth-

er."

"I know how to lick 'em!" shouted Archy. "Chop 'em up fine and disperse the pieces."

"The sheriff of Pickle, W.Va., tried that," said Otto. "Ran a bunch of clown projections through a fine chopper. They reconstituted into one gigantic clown currently scaring hell out of half the state."

"Maybe we could make portable scramblers," said Archy. "Everybody could carry one."

"That's been considered," said the President. "Hunting down projections one by one would take years. Please continue, Mr. Kahler."

"I've found out how they keep going without studio power," said Otto. "They hang around electrical installations—high-tension lines, generators, radio and TV transmitters, even auto batteries. Wherever there are electro-magnetic fields. They go a day or two on their own, then get recharged. There are gangs of them hanging around these places."

"That's it!" pronounced Archy. "That's where we can scramble them."

"We'll probably try it," said Otto, "but it won't get many. They'll just go to the millions of miles of power lines."

"Then turn off all the power," said Archy "Starve 'em"

Several people spoke at once,



and Archy's chest went up. The president silenced them.

"Do you realize what that would mean, turning off the country's power? Deliberate disaster."

Archy reddened. "Well."

"Could Mr. House please refrain from interruptions?" snuffed the Secretary.

June's hand, under the table, patted Archy's knee. She didn't say anything — just patted his knee.

"I have one last question," said the President. "Mr. Kahler, I understand these projections are extremely complex electronic propagations. How can they be maintained by random power fields like batteries and high - tension wires?"

"There's a difference between propagating them and maintaining them," said Otto. "Once you've projected them, maintenance is fairly simple."

"I see," said Conklin. "I believe that concludes our conference. Mr. House, I don't want to see your face for five days. And I want you to come and tell me the projections are gone. All of them. If this happens, the damage might be — well, attended to. If it doesn't — you will be broken, Mr. House, very thoroughly."

"Okay, Pops," said Archy. "I mean — Mr. President."

**B**ACK AT THE HOTEL, June and Otto accompanied Archy

to his suite. He wanted to talk to them, though he had a root-deep feeling nothing could do any good.

Somebody was in the suite, standing with a finger stuck in a light socket. "Hello, bud," grinned the Archy - projection passing from translucency to opaqueness as the current vitalized it. "Thought I'd recharge at *our* place here."

Archy glared. "Ignore the S.O. B.," he told the others. "Without an audience he won't stay."

It took an hour, during which the Archy - projection bragged of his plans for forming a TV company, stage troupes, running for congress, and producing more projections of himself, but finally he left. Archy's face was sunk in his hands.

"Maybe you're the only people I can admit this to," he said, "but I'm whipped."

"You actually mean that, Archy?" June's voice was not quite mocking.

"Yes. I thought there was nothing I couldn't get on top of — I was like that damned walking marionette that just pranced out of here — a blowhard. I'm beat, folks."

"Maybe you'll come up with something," offered Otto. "Maybe. . . ." June shushed him.

"You two had better get out from under," said Archy. "June, find some nice guy to marry — hell, marry Otto, I know he likes you. I'm pulling my money out of the

bank — split it between you. It won't help me where I'm going."

June sat on his lap.

"Honey, suppose there was a way for you to get rid of all those projections? Then you could take the credit and come back strong as ever."

"How could I take the credit?"

"Suppose your own staff made the plan? After all, you're smart enough to hire them."

"Maybe this sounds crazy, coming from me, but the credit would go to whoever deserved it. What good is it to be a big shot if you know you've been licked, even once?"

June seemed to turn something over in her mind, looking at it; there was silence before she spoke.

"I've got an idea," she said.

"What?" he asked hopelessly.

"Let's get married when this is all over. I'd like it better even than a thousand a week."

"You're nuts," he said. "Marry a phony—a blowhard? That's why you never did marry me, isn't it? *Isn't it?*"

"Yes," said June. "And I said, if you remember, that I'd marry you if you ever figured that out. Which you have."

"I've got to go see the desk clerk," said Otto. "Told him I'd help with his — ah — radio set. But here's an idea — why not get married Friday at Big Butte?"

It was all too fast for Archy. "Big Butte? What's that?" But Otto was gone, and June began to tell him.

IT WAS AN EVENING ceremony, the Big Butte, Wyoming, wedding and well attended by everyone but projections. There were no more free-moving projections. Every one in the nation had gathered at Big Butte, in the middle of Wyoming, for a popularity contest and organizational meeting organized by Archy and the Archy projections, backed by Full - projection money. And when they were gathered — the whole fantastic crew of them — Otto had actuated the gigantic scrambler concealed on the butte and the insubstantial pageant faded, leaving not a wrack behind.

The honeymoon was marred by one small thing.

"You know," said Archy "one thing I've gotta do is find out who sabotaged me in the first place."

"I guess I can let you know," said June. "I wanted to teach you a lesson. I had no idea it'd get out of hand — what are you going to do?"

Archy had made a sudden move. "I was going to spank you," he said, firming his grip on her. "But now I have ahold of you. I'd rather — well — we *are* married."

THE END

**They were a peaceful people and somehow couldn't stand the thought of executing their only criminal. The answer was to discover a—**

**T**HE DAY LUGERT'S criminals gunned down three citizens in a bold broad-daylight robbery, Domnas Karson, Third Speaker of the Council, said, "I think I've got the answer."

"Answer? To what?" asked Murgon Darell Fourth Speaker.

"To Lugert," said Karson. "The weapon we can use against that throwback who's terrorizing us all."

Darell sighed wearily. "There is no answer to Lugert, I'm afraid. We're peaceful people; he's a throwback to a more violent age. There's no way to cope with him. Would you want to be the one to shoot him down?"

Karson shuddered and said, "No, not me. Of course not. I'm no more capable of violence than anyone else. But Lugert can be stopped. We can get help."

"From where?"

"From the past," said Karson. "From the ugly crime-ridden world we've evolved out of. Dr. Lorence of the Science Council has developed a time-net which . . ."

"Of course!" Darell exclaimed. "Bring a man out of the past! A man who won't be inhibited by our innate hatred of violence, a man who'll be able to deal with Lugert as he deserves!" He rose

and strode around the long council-room in quick, nervous steps. "Call Lorence, Karson. Get him at work on the project at once. We can't waste any more time. There's no telling when Lugert might . . ."

The visiphone chimed three times. Karson crossed the room and depressed the receiving stud. On the screen the features of a thick-faced, stocky man appeared.

"Lugert! What do you want?"

"I'm pleased you recognize me so quickly, Speaker Karson," said the stocky man in a slow, deep voice. "My fame must be spreading, then."

"You didn't call to chat with us, Lugert. What is it you want?"

Lugert's face hardened slowly.

"You're right. I didn't call to chat. I called to tell you to get out."

"What's that?"

"I said, get out. Pack up your records and papers and clear out of the Government Building, Karson. You and all the rest of you. I'm taking over."

Karson paled. "Taking over — *the government?* How far do you think you can go, Lugert?"

Again the confident, cheerful, steel-hard grin that had become the Lugert trademark in such an

# HERO FROM YESTERDAY

By

Robert Randall

astonishingly brief time. "How far? Why, Karson, I can go as far as I like. There isn't one of you who dares say *No* to anything I ask. And now I'm asking for the government. Go ahead; refuse. Get indignant. Threaten me. All this easy winning bores me, Karson."

Karson stared at the thick-featured face framed by the visiscreen. "You've won again," he said after a pause. "We can't fight you, Lugert. How much time do we have to evacuate the Government Building?"

"How much do you need?"

Karson thought for a moment. "A week, at least. Is that all right?"

"One week, - no more," Lugert agreed. "My men and I will come up to take over things at noon on 7 September." He chuckled. "7 September, 2531. A day to go down in history, eh, Karson?"

He broke the contact.

KARSON TURNED FROM the dead screen and looked at Speaker Darell. "Well, there's our ultimatum," he said. "One week



to get out and then Lugert takes over."

"That means we'll have to move fast," said Darell. "You'd better call Dr. Lorence. Only a week. . ."

Karson was already busy punching out Lorence's code number on the visiphone. When the scientist appeared Karson quickly sketched out the situation as it stood. Lorence's eyes widened when Karson told of Lugert's threat. Then the Speaker went on to outline the part Lorence and his time-net would play in the attempt to defeat Lugert.

"I'll see what I can do," Lorence promised. "I'll try to find the man you're looking for."

"Can you do it in two days or less?"

"I hope so," Lorence said.

It took two days. Then Lorence rang the Office of the Council and told Karson, "It's worked!"

"The time-net? You've got the man?"

"I have. I'll bring him right over."

Lorence entered the council room a while later, followed by a tall, thin, lean-faced man dressed in archaic clothing. Karson's heart thumped excitedly; here was the man, he thought! Here was the hero from yesteryear who would put an end to the threat Lugert represented.

"This is Speaker Karlson and

Speaker Darell of our governing Council," Lorence said.

The man from the past nodded curtly. "You can call me Jack." His voice was cold, flat, with a curious twang of regional accent in it; the vowel-pronunciation was odd, as was to be expected.

Karson eyed the hard-faced stranger. He didn't seem to have an ounce of fat on him; he looked tough, uncompromising. "I think you'll do," he said after a moment's study. "You've got the stuff."

"Thanks," Jack said in a wry voice. "Suppose you line the program out for me now. Give me the picture; tell me what I'm here for."

Karson frowned. "You're here to help us, because we're helpless ourselves. Did Dr. Lorence tell you what the characteristics of this world are?"

"He said a few things. You fill me in."

"It's 300 years since we last had a war of any sort. Crime had been extinct 150 years — until Lugert."

"Lugert. I heard of him. Who is he?"

"He's the man you're going to kill for us," Karson said bluntly.

The man named Jack grinned. "Oh? A rub-out job?"

"I think that's the term," said Karson. "Lugert's a throwback—a man out of the past. A man out of your time, suddenly reborn in our era for God knows what rea-

son. He's cold and hard and utterly ruthless. Nothing stops him; we're powerless. The compulsion against violence is too strong in us."

"Just a bunch of patsies," Jack said. "Lugert snaps the whip and you all lie down and play dead when he says so. That it?"

It took Karson a few moments to digest the strange idioms. Finally he said, "Right. He began small, with petty thefts and burglaries—he took anything he wanted. Then he began branching out. He compelled a scientist to create a serum for him that would instill absolute loyalty to him in anyone who took it; using that serum, he's built up a band of henchmen who shares his violent ways. Two days ago he decided to make the ultimate grab for power: he ordered us to evacuate the Government Building and let him take over."

"And you said yes," Jack remarked.

"What else could we do? But we have a weapon: you. You share Lugert's way of life; we don't. We can strike at him indirectly, through you."

"You want me to kill this Lugert. What's in it for me?"

"What?"

"I said, what's in it for me? What do I get out of it besides the risk of a punctured hide? I don't do these things for my health,

Karson."

Karson thought about that for a moment. "Of course; there would have to be some reward, wouldn't there? Well, what would you want? We can supply virtually anything, if you'll do the job properly. Os-miridium? Sapphires? Books? Women?"

The man named Jack shook his head. "Gold," he said.

Karson was startled. "Gold? But why would you want — oh, very well. Gold was the reigning object of value in your day, wasn't it? Would 25 pounds be enough?"

The man from the past smiled unwarmlly. "Quite enough," he said. "You got yourself a deal."

THE MAN NAMED JACK cautiously approached the big building that served as headquarters for Lugert until the time when he would move into the sprawling area of the Government Building.

Jack wore modern clothes; his own shabby ancient ones were carefully stored away in a laboratory closet. His hair was close-cropped in the current fashion.

But inside his skull was the mind of a 20th-Century man. And hidden in the folds of his vest was a 20th-Century automatic, a snubnosed .38 ready to spit death.

The day was 5 September 2531; he had been in this strange world of the future three days and if all

went well he would return to his own time today. He had spent the three days studying the approach to Lugert's headquarters, familiarizing himself with the layout, readying himself for the killing that had to be done.

He was thinking, *Funny old duck, that Karson. They all are. Imagine, letting someone like Lugert push them all over the place because all the fight's been bred out of them!*

Well, in 600 years a lot could happen. He shrugged. It wasn't his business to worry about the doings of his remote descendants.

His business was to kill.

He knew that Lugert's personal suite was on the eighth floor of the building, that he was guarded by one man outside the door, one at the elevator entrance, and several in the lobby. He didn't have to worry about the ones in the lobby. He didn't really have to worry about any of them on the way in: they wouldn't be expecting anyone dangerous. The only dangerous people in this world were Lugert and his henchmen and they'd probably be off-guard when he came by.

His forearm itched where Lorraine had inserted the sliver of metal. The old scientist had been very apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but we have to do this. We can't risk having

another Lugert. This is to make sure you don't get delusions of power once you've finished off Lugert."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we can control you hypnotically through this generator I'm embedding in your arm. Just in case you decide not to go back to your own time when you're through here."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't want to run this place."

But he couldn't blame them for being cautious. Not at all. They'd be even more helpless before him than they would be under Lugert, after all.

He drew near the big building. The guard in front said, "Who are you, and where are you going?"

Jack made his voice as subservient-sounding as he could. He said, "I'm from Speaker Karson. I'd like to see Lugert."

The guard frowned. "How come Karson didn't just phone the boss?"

"Beats me," Jack said. "Must be top-secret."

The guard frowned at Jack's strange language, shrugged, and sent him on in. He passed rapidly through the lobby and reached the elevator.

A guard inside the elevator wanted to know where he was going. "I'm from Speaker Karson," he said. "I have an urgent message to deliver to Lugert."

The guard held out his hand. "Let's have it. I'll take it up to him; the boss doesn't like to meet strangers."

Smiling coldly, Jack fumbled in his pocket and withdrew the .38. It fired once; the silencer muffled the sound down to a squirt! A neat hole appeared in the elevator operator's head.

Still smiling, Jack pressed *Eight* and waited for the door to close.

THREE MINUTES and two killings later he stood outside the office of Lugert himself. The elevator was clear, now, and the floor was empty of henchmen. That would make the getaway easier, Jack thought.

He knocked.

"Who's there?" a voice growled.

"Mr. Lugert?"

"Yeah. Who's there and what do you want?"

"Urgent message from Speaker Karson, sir. Very important that I see you, Mr. Lugert."

After a considerable pause the door swung open. Lugert stood there, wearing a glittering plastic robe. He hadn't shaved; he was short and squat and fierce-looking. Jack smiled and drew the gun.

"Please step inside and keep your hands in the air," he said quietly. "And don't make a fuss. This gun happens to kill people when it goes off."

Lugert stepped back. Jack noticed the man didn't seem frightened and wondered whether it was because Lugert just didn't believe another man could possibly offer danger or because Lugert was without fear.

He said, "I've killed three of your henchmen. I'm figuring on killing you, now. Speaker Karson is paying me to do it, Lugert."

Quietly Lugert said, "Who are you? Where'd you come from?"

"You can call me Jack. You don't know me."

"I can see there's a toughness about you," Lugert said. "You're like me. I didn't think there were any others like me in the world. Where did Karson find you?"

"In the past, Lugert. In yesterday. He dredged me up from the 20th-Century. There were lots like you and me then, Lugert."

For the first time fear showed in Lugert's face. A dribble of perspiration snaked down the side of his fleshy jaw. Paler than he had been before, he said, "From the past? Then — then you can really kill me?"

Jack nodded. "I'm going to. Karson's paying me 25 pounds of gold for it."

"Gold? But that stuff's worthless! You can find it anywhere. What do you want gold for?"

"In my time," said Jack, "the stuff wasn't so common. It was



worth plenty. Times change."

A crafty glint showed in Lugert's eyes. "You're just a hired killer, then. A man without conscience. Suppose I offer you 30 pounds of gold not to kill me. Fifty pounds? A hundred?"

The generator in Jack's arm twitched warningly. He knew Karson and Lorence were listening in. "No," he said. "There's no percentage in it. You don't have the time-net. You can't send me back to my own time. I'll stick with their offer."

"No! Look, we can be partners! You're the kind of man I can get to like, Jack. We'll work together, you and me. Fifty-fifty! An even split!"

Again the generator twitched. Jack sighed. "Sorry, Lugert. Can't do it. I made an agreement and I'm going to stick to it. I'm going to kill you."

Sweat streamed down Lugert's face. "It's not fair," he said. "I had this world under my thumb—and then they had to find you somewhere! Why? Why'd they have to mess everything up?"

"Sorry, Lugert. It's just a lousy break for you," Jack said emotionlessly. "This is the way it's gonna be."

"No!" Lugert yelled.

Jack raised the .38. Lugert threw up his hands as if to protect himself but Jack's finger tightened

anyway. The gun went squirt!

Lugert toppled heavily to the floor. He lay there on the heavy-pile rug, his blood spilling out and staining the brown carpet a deep red.

Jack looked at him calmly. Then he turned and left the room.

The floor was still empty. Quietly he got into the untended elevator, rode it to the lobby, and stepped out into the street. The whole job had taken 10 minutes. Ten minutes and four killings, and he hadn't even raised a sweat

DARELL AND KARSON and Dr. Lorence were waiting for him in the councilroom of the Government Building when he got back.

"Great work," Karson said. He looked pale and shaken. "We watched the whole thing over the transmitter Lorence built into you. Every step. It — it was well done."

"Thanks," Jack said. "Is the gold ready?"

Lorence handed him a heavy satchel. "It's here. Twenty-five pounds. Plus five pounds extra for your cooperation."

"Thanks again," Jack said. "Glad to be of help." He didn't mention the moments when he wavered, when he had nearly gone over to Lugert's side—probably would have if it hadn't been for the generator planted in his arm.

He wondered briefly how it would have been, living here with all these quiet philosophical types.

He said, "I suppose you're going to send me back to my own time now."

Lorence nodded.

The four of them went to Lorence's office and Jack climbed back into the elaborate harness.

Lorence bustled around him, making adjustments carefully. "We went to gauge this thing to the minute, you know," he explained. "No mistakes."

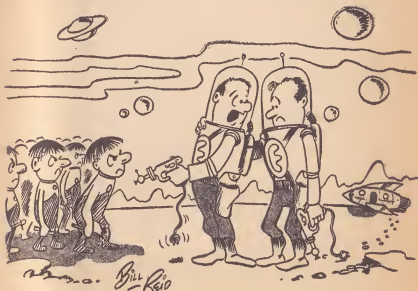
"I appreciate the care," Jack said. He held tightly to his satchel.

"We owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude," Karson said. "A debt that no satchel of gold could ever repay. You've done us a great service. You're a hero, Jack. A savior of humanity. We'd never have beaten Lugert without you."

"Ready to go," Lorence said. He threw the switch.

Time began to swirl around the killer from the past. As 2531 started to fade away from him he grinned for the last time and said, "Imagine that. Me, a hero! I like that, Me, John Dillinger — a savior of humanity!"

And then he was gone.



"No, I didn't bring the extension cord — I thought you did!"

# RESCUE MISSION

by

Robert Silverberg

**Snaring both Earthmen in a mind-web was easy for the mutant telepath. But once you've caught your prey—how do you get rid of them?**

RICK MASON'S SHIP was still high over Mordarga, coming in for a landing, when the cry for help sounded in his audio phones.

Rick frowned, reached to the control panel to turn up the amplification — then realized that the voice had not come over the audio after all. It had spoken in his mind.

*Help! Rick, they've caught me!*

There was urgency in the mental cry. Instantly, Mason sized up the situation.

It was his partner, Klon Darra, the Venusian—the other half of this mentally-attuned Solar System intelligence team. Klon Darra was in trouble!

He focussed his mental energies and replied: *I read you, Klon Darra. What's the problem?*

The response was blurred and indistinct, as if the Venusian were laboring under great mental strain. *I...landed on schedule. Fell into*

*hands of . . . ruler. In prison. Going to be tortured. I. . .*

Mason struggled to keep his attention on his descending spaceship while picking up the Venusian's fading mental voice. *Go ahead, Klon Darra. I hear you.*

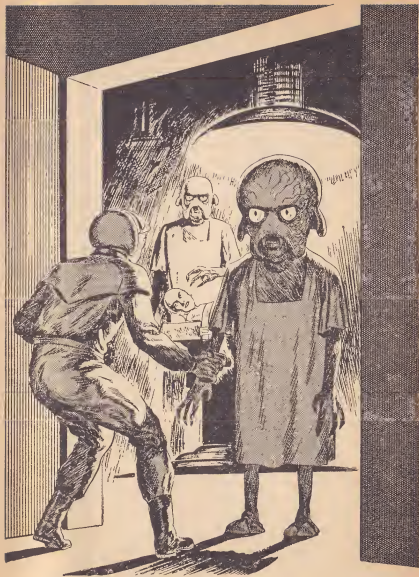
*They're going to torture me. Help me, Mason. Help!*

*Where are you? Mason asked.*

*Dungeons of the main palace, Mordarga City. Hurry, Rick. There's not much time!*

Mason switched on the fore visiplate and the mottled grey-and-blue surface of Mordarga became visible ahead of him. The planet Mordarga was one of the universe's potential trouble-spots, That was why the Solar System Government had sent a team of its intelligence agents there.

But they had planned on a leisurely, detailed reconnaissance of the planet, intending to return to home base with a full account of



Mordarga's weaknesses and future militaristic plans. Now, that was changed; Klon Darra would have to be rescued at once. The Mordargans probably knew by now that the Solar System had discovered Mordarga's warlike aims.

Rick began setting up his landing orbit. The tiny two-man ship curved sharply downward as his trained fingers played over the control console. The planet of Mordarga sprang up to meet the down-plunging ship.

**M**ORDARGA WAS IN the Sirius system, a big, ugly world inhabited by big, ugly humanoids. Mason landed in a secluded spot on the north continent of the planet, coming to rest in a foul-smelling valley between two looming mountains.

Jutting angular blue-leaved trees stuck up around, and hoarse-voiced alien wildlife chattered and yawped in the background. Mason strapped his safety-kit to his side, flipped on the homing-switch he'd need to find his way back to the ship, and lightly swung down from the ground. He started to walk.

Unless his figures were wrong Mordarga City lay three miles to the west. He kept his receptive mind attuned, hoping to hear from the Venusian again but Klon Darra was not sending.

They made a good team, Mason

and the Venusian. A pair of Earthmen somehow never were as efficient together as a mixed-planet outfit; the green-skinned Venusian had certain attributes Mason lacked and vice-versa. Together they were a well-nigh perfect intelligence team. Knowledge of Mordarga's future intentions was essential to the safety and security of the Solar System.

Suddenly Klon Darra's voice sounded in his mind.

*Mason, have you landed yet?*

*Yes. I'm on my way. You all right?*

*They still don't know why I'm on Mordarga. They picked me up on suspicion. If you can get me out of here before they find out.*

*I'm three miles out of Mordarga City. Can you hold out for another half hour?* Mason asked.

Silence for a moment. Then the Venusian said, *I think so. So far they've just tried some elementary torture. Not kid stuff but I'm still okay.*

Mason grinned. A Venusian's pain threshold was fantastically high; the Mordargans could torture Klon Darra for days without getting any essential information from him. But there were other methods.

Klon Darra said: *They've sent for a telepath. Once they penetrate my mind they'll know why we're here. We'll both be cooked.*

*Don't worry, Mason telepathed.*

*I'll be there with bells on.*

There were occasional buildings now, he saw; the main bulk of Mordarga City lay up ahead, sprawling in a disorderly, confused fashion. The Mordargans, for all their neat precision of mind, cared little about the arrangement of their cities.

Mason saw some of the Mordargans now—husky brutes seven feet tall, square-shouldered and thick-muscled. They were gray-skinned with blazing white eyes and savage fangs; they diverged most sharply from the humanoid pattern in the pair of thick, stubby antenna sprouting from their heavy-browed foreheads.

Those antenna governed the extra Mordargan sense—the sense of balance, of perspective, of distance-judgment. It made them deadly in a hand-to-hand fight.

A couple of the Mordargans looked at him suspiciously but without overt antagonism. Earth and Mordarga were still theoretically at peace and Earthmen on Mordarga were, if not common, at least not totally unknown.

Mason kept his eyes to the ground and walked quickly past the Mordargans. They were a surly, unpredictable race; he didn't want any trouble with them now.

He tried a message to Klon Darra.

*Hey, Venusian! How's it going?*

*The telepath is due to arrive in one hour, Rick. Where are you now?*

*On the outskirts, just coming in to the city. I'll be there to spring you in plenty of time.*

The main palace was visible ahead, about a mile further into the city. Mason quickened his pace. There was time but not much.

He stepped between a pair of drunken Mordargans who were jostling each other on the narrow street. Suddenly one of them turned and said, "Hey, there's an Earthman. Come on, Terran. Have a drink with us?"

THEY WERE WOBBLING unsteadily. Mason caught his breath. He had little enough time to get to Klon Darra as it was. He calculated the speed at which they could move and wondered if he could outrun them.

"Sorry," he snapped. "I'm too busy for a drink now."

He lowered his head and ran.

They grunted in surprise and started to chase him. He heard their heavy feet clobbering along on the pavement. He cursed. They were probably just trying to be sociable but this was no time for that.

"Ho, Earthman! You run fast but your legs are short!"

He glanced back. They were gaining on him. A tangle of build-

ings loomed up ahead and he made for those.

A rough hand clamped around the back of his neck and dragged him to a halt. Mason spun around and waded in without waiting for an introduction.

His fist crashed into the stomach of the nearest Mordargan and sent him rocking back against his companion. Mason hit him again and he started to sag. The heavy body thudded against the pavement.

But the other Mordargan was more sober. He stepped over his companion's unconscious body and wrapped mighty arms around Mason's middle.

The Earthman gasped and turned purple. His fists pounded at the alien without avail.

"Had enough, Earthman?"

"You're choking me! Let go!"

"When a Mordargan invites you to drink with him, you drink!" The alien tightened his grip and Mason felt the universe reel. He could hardly see; his eyes were ready to pop. Against the 300 pound Mordargan he stood no chance at all.

Suddenly the alien released him. Mason took several hesitant, dizzy steps, sucking in breath as fast as he could. The alien's bearhug had nearly finished him.

The big Mordargan was chuckling happily. "Earthman, you don't know how close you came to death just then!"

"Oh, yes I do!" Mason said, rubbing his bruised body. There didn't seem to be any obvious broken bones at any rate. But he was wasting valuable time.

"Will you come now, Terran?"

"I — I have an appointment," Mason said. He realized the futility of trying to run away again. There was a blaster in his pocket but it was hardly possible to gun the creature down on a public street. "I can't stay," he said.

"You can't? We'll see about that."

THE MORDARGAN equivalent of a bar was a long, low-ceilinged place dimly lighted. Curious fumes of alcohol and other things drifted in the atmosphere. Mason could see Mordargans lying prostrate here and there, some of them totally unconscious, others contentedly sucking on feeding-tubes.

There was no way to escape the obstinate conviviality of the alien who had encountered him. Mason's only hope was to make a quick exit once the Mordargan had decided he was through drinking.

"What'll you have, Terran?"

"You name it," Mason said. "I'll match you drink for drink if you'll pay."

"Fair enough. We'll start with *gruuna*. Straight?"

"Why not?"

"Two bowls of *gruuna*," the alien bellowed.

The drinks arrived. They were a murky, slimy-looking stuff that fizzed faintly and gave off a sour odor. Mason stared at his bowl unhappily.

"Drink up, Earthman!" The Mordargan lifted his bowl in massive fingers and held it to his tooth-ringed mouth. He drained it in one long slugging gulp. Mason shivered a little and picked up his own bowl.

He sipped. The stuff was as mild as molten uranium and twice as potent. It seared its way down into his stomach and landed with a *thunk*. Mason wondered if the drink gave off alpha particles; it was that hot.

*The things a man has to do in the name of Solar System intelligence*, he thought.

He wondered what was happening to the Venusian. Impatience coursed through him. He had to get away, had to reach the dungeon before the Mordargans could interrogate Klon Darra with the telepath.

*Rick! Where are you? came the sudden anxious mental plea. The telepath's here. They'll be questioning me soon, and...*

*I'm trying to get to you*, Mason telepathed. *But I'm having trouble. Stall if you can.*

"Ready for your second bowl,

Earthman?" the Mordargan asked jovially.

Mason shuddered. "I'm not through with this one," he said.

"Slow, eh? Drink it down!"

Obediently Mason lifted the drink to his lips, took another shallow sip, winced as the ghastly stuff travelled down his gullet. Maybe *gruuna* was champagne to these evil-smelling so-and-sos, but it was no drink for an Earthman.

And the telepath had arrived at the dungeon. Before long they'd know everything...

He squinted around the edge of the bowl, eyeing the big Mordargan speculatively. *Gruuna* was potent stuff, he reflected; what would be the effect if I hurled a bowlful of it into the Mordargan's eyes?

It was worth a try. In one quick motion he lowered the bowl from his mouth, heaved its contents upward into the alien's face and started to run. He heard a roar of pain and anger from behind.

And the door slammed shut in his face.

He hadn't figured on that. The bartender probably could control the door manually from behind the bar and the moment Mason had broken away the signal to shut the door had been given.

He turned. The alien was rumbling toward him, wiping his eyes, bellowing in rage. Mason started



to reach for his blaster but there was no time. The giant crashed into him.

He fought back gamely but the Mordargan was a foot taller and 125 pounds heavier, he didn't stand a chance. Fists slammed into his stomach and chest; he beat them off feebly, hardly able to see in the dimness of the bar.

*Rick! Rick! Where are you?* came the Venusian's mental voice.

But Mason was unable to answer. A barrage of mighty blows crashed in on him and he spun, clawing to keep his balance, and started to fold up. He heard Klon Darra saying, *Here comes the telepath now.* His head crashed against the wall and he blanked out.

The amused laughter of the Mordargans seemed to follow him into unconsciousness.

HE AWOKE LATER—hours, days, weeks, years later, it seemed. He felt mummified.

His body ached; his eyes wouldn't focus properly and in his mouth was the acrid, retch-inducing taste of the *gruuna*.

But aside from the pain, aside from the physical miseries he felt, he sensed a stinging sense of personal failure. He was an agent of Solar System Intelligence, a member of the galaxy's proudest and toughest organization...and he had failed to rescue his own part-

ner.

By now the telepath had probably drained Klon Darra's mind of its secrets, had learned that there was another Intelligence agent loose on Mordarga, that Earth suspected the big planet of hostile intentions, that...

It was all over. The team of Klon Darra and Rick Mason had been considered the tops of Intelligence but that rating looked pretty hollow now. The Venusian had gotten himself trapped on landing and Mason had flubbed a chance to rescue him. He had wound up lying somewhere—where?—with a hangover and a headache.

He looked around. He was in an alley and by the smell of it it was the alley back of the bar. They had probably dumped him after the Mordargans had finished having their fun with him.

Bright Sirius blazed high overhead. It was morning, probably getting toward noon. The Morning After.

*Mason? Are you awake?*

The soft mental whisper jolted him like a blast of raw energy. He just hadn't expected to hear from the Venusian.

*Where are you, Klon Darra? What's going on?*

*I'm still in the dungeon, the Venusian said. They'll be interrogating me again this afternoon. Why weren't you here last night?*

Mason went red with shame. *I ran into trouble. I'm sorry, Klon Darra. Damned sorry.*

*There's no time for feeling sorry now,* came Klon Darra's thought. *Break our mental linkage and get off Mordarga in a hurry.*

*And leave you here?*

*I don't matter. They know you're here, Rick. Leave now, while you can. They've sent orders out to find you and bring you in. Get going!*

Mason shook his head obstinately, even though he knew the Venusian could not see the gesture. He got to his feet and leaned against the wall, rubbed his throbbing forehead. *I'm not leaving you here, Klon Darra. I'll be there inside the hour and this time I mean it.*

He started to walk out of the alley, groping unsteadily at the wall to keep from falling flat on his face.

Slowly, strength returned. And purpose.

He had fumbled last night. Now, he would make it up.

THE MAIN PALACE was a tall, lopsided structure built of a coarse-grained granite-like stone. The noon sun struck slantwise against the slabs which sparkled weirdly. Rick Mason stood outside and directed a thought at the Venusian within.

*Klon Darra?*

*Yes?*

*I'm right outside the palace.*

*I thought I told you to leave Mordarga at once.*

*The hell with that,* Mason said in an impatient mental snap. *I'm here. Guide me in.*

*Very well. I'm in a dungeon on the third sublevel of the palace. If you can get that far I'll direct you the rest of the way.*

A Mordargan guard, his nose in the air, stood outside the main walk that led to the palace. Mason walked past him, nodded obsequiously, and kept going. The guard didn't even bother to notice him.

He didn't need to. He was just a decoration. But the guard at the inner wall frowned suspiciously and said, "Where are you going, Earthman?"

"Inside." Mason's voice was tight. "I want to look around a little."

"Do you have a pass?"

"Sure. Right here in my hand." The subminiaturized blaster in his palm flashed once, a brief bright spurt of energy that bored a pencil-thin hole through the Mordargan's burly chest. Mason leaped forward, caught the guard as he started to fall, and eased him to a sitting position on a bench.

The alien's eyes were glazing. The shot had been instantly fatal.

"You wait right here," Mason told the dead Mordargan. "I'm

going inside."

He ran up the broad stone steps of the palace, entered an empty corridor and ducked into a beckoning stairway. No one interfered with him as he circled downward, down into the palace's depths.

On the third level downward he shot another beam of thought at the captive Venusian.

*I'm here, Klon Darra!*

*You're a crazy fool, but I'm glad you did it,* came the reply. *Go down the left-hand corridor about a hundred paces and turn right. There's an alcove there and a half-stairway that descends about eight feet. I'm in a room at the bottom of that stairway. Got all that?*

*You bet. I'm going to come in shooting—and we'll be on our way out of here in no time.*

Following the Venusian's instructions he tiptoed along the strangely silent corridor, looking for the alcove and the half-stairway.

He found it.

The door was unguarded. Palming the tiny blaster, he went quietly down the stairs, groped for the handle of the door.

In the instant he threw the door open the Venusian's mental voice wailed, *Look out, it's a trap!*

But it was too late. A rolling tide of mental force came thundering out and held him frozen.

THERE WERE THREE people in the room. One was Klon Darra, lying on a table, his hands and legs strapped down with metal binding.

The other two were Mordargans. One was tall and fierce-looking, with bright white eyes glaring authoritatively from his gray face. The other was small—no taller than an Earthman—with an abnormally large, grotesque, swollen head. The head was light blue rather than the usual gray and was covered with the pulsing striations of veins—the telepath.

The telepath was staring at Mason and holding him immobile.

"Now we have both the spies," said the big Mordargan in a rumbling voice. "Well done, Senibro. Very well done indeed."

Mason struggled to move, to muster enough coordination to fire the blaster he still held in his hand. But despite an effort that brought sweat to his face he was totally frozen, statuelike.

The big Mordargan approached and casually relieved him of the blaster—and his other weapons as well. Impotently, Mason glared at him.

"All right," the big man said to the telepath. "You can relax the controls now. He's weaponless."

Mason went limp as the mental force-field blinked out around him. He said, "What the hell is this?"

Who are you, and by what authority are you holding a citizen of the Solar System prisoner here?"

The big Mordargan grinned. "I'm Levron Clargo. You may know me: I'm head of Security in Mordarga City. I'm holding this Venusian here by authority of my position, and you too. The Venusian was apprehended on suspicion of spying two days ago. We interrogated him and learned he had a partner at large on Mordarga. It was simpler to bring you here by a ruse than go looking for you."

"Ruse? But—"

Levron Clargo smiled coldly. "We've been in possession of the mind of your Venusian aide since Senibro, here, interrogated him late yesterday."

Mason was stunned. The messages from Klondarra today, the selfless plea that Mason leave Mordarga immediately and save himself—

A ruse. A trap. A hoax.

They had used reverse psychology, played on his Earthman nature, knowing that if they told him to leave he'd first try to rescue his partner.

And now they had both. Mason felt like four kinds of idiot.

"Senibro, we can now interrogate both of them. But be very careful. I want to learn the mechanism of this linkage between them. Such a

linkage would be very useful to know."

Tensely Mason waited as the mutant telepath approached him. He looked away, avoiding the penetrating eyes. He glanced at the sleeping form of Klondarra on the table—Klondarra whose mind had probably watched helplessly as it had been manipulated to snare Mason.

"Look at me," the telepath ordered.

Mason formed a plan of action. He decided to leap on the telepath, kill him if possible; Levron Clargo would kill him but that didn't matter. Mason realized that if the aliens ever learned the secret of the telepathic linkage it would be disastrous for Earth.

"Look at my eyes," the alien repeated.

Mason readied himself to spring.

*Don't do it,* whispered the mental voice of Klondarra.

*That you, Klondarra?*

*Yes. The mutant has relaxed control over me. Don't jump him as you're going to do. Let him start to probe you.*

*Why?* Mason asked. He was suspicious; Klondarra's mental voice had fooled him once already.

*Two minds are stronger than one, Rick. And we're linked.*

Mason understood. Slowly he raised his head and stared levelly

into the brooding, hypnotically-compelling eyes of the alien telepath.

He felt the alien mind begin to enter his. Strange tendrils of thought probed within his skull. He held his breath, waiting, knowing now that Klon Darra had spoken the truth.

"Find anything?" the Security chief asked.

"Not yet," replied the telepath. "There's still some resistance. I—"

And Mason struck.

His mind, supported wholeheartedly by Klon Darra's, lashed out viciously at the mind of the probing mutant. A solid red fist of mental force crashed through the telepath's barriers. The Mordargan staggered, arms flailing.

*Hit him again!* Mason thought triumphantly to Klon Darra, and the Venusian responded. Jointly they barraged the alien's mind.

"What's happening, Senibro?" asked the Security Chief.

The telepath moaned. "I — I —"

He slumped and fell heavily.

The Solar System agents gave the telepath an extra jolt, a final thrust, to finish burning out the sensitive mutated mind.

"Senibro! Senibro!" the Security Chief roared. He fumbled for his blaster.

But Mason had long since anti-

cipated the clumsy move. The speed of thought is infinite; Mason and the Venusian, working jointly, easily immobilized the Mordargan.

The blaster dropped to the floor.

"Go easy on him," Mason said aloud to his partner. "We'll need him to get us out of the palace."

"Right."

Together they bound the alien in a hypnotic compulsion — to conduct the two Solarians safely out of the palace. Then Mason sent an inquisitive mind-probe into the Mordargan's psyche.

The yield of the probe was rich — data on Mordargan military movements, secret plans. Mason carefully memorized these things.

Then he freed the Venusian. Klon Darra smiled in gratitude.

"I was afraid you'd never get here," he said. "After they caught me I thought we were both finished. But we fooled them."

Mason nodded. "We're still a good team, Klon Darra. A little careless at times but who minds that as long as we bring home what we went out here for."

He turned to the stupefied Mordargan. "Let's go, Levron Clargo."

When they returned to the ship, they would file their report. Mission — *successful!*

THE END



## Heat Resistance



THE barrier to faster airplanes and rockets is heat. The barrier to gas turbine development for cars and trains is—heat.

But it looks as if this barrier will be cracked. Metals which erode under the rush of hot gases, and aircraft sheathing which glows red-hot and melts under air friction at two thousand miles an hour, are being made heat proof not by alloying with mysterious elements, but by coating with ceramic and plastic materials. From the ceramic world comes news of a thin porcelain-like coating over stainless steel, which permits that metal to be operated at the limit of its heat-guarded tensile strength. Sprayed

on in a thin coating prevents the steel from being eroded and eaten away by fearful molecular bombardment by fast-flowing gases.

This happy news gives high speed in rockets and planes new hope. But better it makes possible the development of a gas turbine using cheap metal yet capable of withstanding the cyclonic ravaging gases within it. The automotive industry is working madly to make this discovery practicable so that the *Era* of gas-turbine driven cars will be a matter of years—not decades. Ceramics—the oldest material of Man's handiwork through a hundred thousand years—turns out to be the best and latest!





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*Mrs. Orvil Werling: R. R. 2 Ossian, Ind.*

Age 26: "I'm married, have a four month old son, and have been a science fiction fan for 11 years. I'm interested in ESP, archaeology, astronomy and music (especially light classical and folk). My hobbies include s-f collecting and poetry. I'd like to hear from fans with similar interests."

#### **DANCING TEACHER & NURSE**

*Valda D. Forsyth: Box 736, Jamestown, N.Y.*

Age 40: "I'm a dancing teacher and nurse, interested in the raising of dogs—especially toy poodles. Also interested in photography, handcraft, and the investigation of psychic phenomena particularly from the aspect of spontaneous physical and mental healing. I have a wire recorder transcriber, so can

correspond by letter or wirespondence."

#### **STUDENT**

*Philip C. Norfleet: 2585 S. Humboldt St., Denver 10, Colo.*

Age 15: "I'm a high school student. My hobbies include s-f reading and collecting, electronics, astronomy, and all the sciences in general. I'd like to write s-f stories and am interested in UFO, ESP, and time travel. Would also like to play chess with anyone via mail."

#### **EDITORIAL WRITER**

*Eugene Bertram Willard: P.O. Box 224, Everett 49, Mass.*

Age 75: "I'm not dependent on a cane so don't let my age fool you. I've been an editorial writer in many media for many years. I have a deep interest in science fiction and would like to discuss factual sciences with interested readers."

## STUDENT

*John Wiese*: 1643 Lincoln Ave., Des Plaines, Ill.

Age 14: "Naturally, I like science fiction. I'd like to hear from others my age, guys and gals, interested in basketball, psi powers, and those who'd like to try a series of telepathic experiments."

## TAXIDERMIST

*Elizabeth Reams*: P. O. Box 167, North Platte, Nebr.

Age 50: "I'm a taxidermist by profession, also holding a degree as a Dr. of Psychic Science. I'd like to correspond with anyone interested in Atlantis, Lemuria, and particularly those who would like to discuss the interpretations of the symbols, metaphors and allegories of the ancient histories, myths and legends."

## STUDENT

*Zenobia Raghunandan*: 41 Eldert St., Brooklyn 7, N.Y.

Age 15: "I'm an s-f reader who would like to correspond with boys and girls my age—or adults—on any subject not too technical. I own a tape recorder so can exchange taped letters."

## STUDENT

*Jon Brooker*: 629 Central Ave., Fort Erie, Ont., Canada.

Age 14: "I'm a freshman in high school, read widely in both science fiction and fantasy. Enjoy all types of music with possible exception of heavy classical. I'm particularly fond of calypso. Would like to hear

from guys and gals similarly interested in the above, also swimming."

## STUDENT

*Susie Ley*: 365 North St., Babylon, N.Y.

Age 15: "I'm a high school student, science fiction fan, and rock 'n roll enthusiast. I'm an Elvis Presley fan to boot! Will enjoy hearing from others my age."

## AVIATION TECH

*Jerry Garriott*: VA65, NAS, Alameda, Calif.

Age 20: "I'm an Aviation Electronics Tech, 3rd class. I'm from Wyoming, with interests including sports, pop records, and of course, radio electronics. Also have a keen interest in motorcycles, and being a good sailor—girls! Hope to hear from anyone interested."

## STUDENT

*Maria Baldanado*: 2418 Cherry St., Hoquiam, Wash.

Age 14: "I'm a high school freshman, with interests including science fiction, corresponding, dancing, and general teenage pursuits. Hope to hear from boys and girls my age."

## STUDENT

*Cloyd McCurdy*: Rt. 5, Box 474, Springfield, Mo.

Age 15: "I'm a high school sophomore, interested in s-f, pop music (especially Pat Boone) flying saucers, and general science. I tinker with radios and would like to hear from other fans."



## SAILOR

*Charles Brown:* USS Tarawa, CVS-40, E Division, FPO, New York, N.Y.

Age 20: "I'm a collector of science fiction and fantasy, with my occupation being the US Navy. That plain and simple."

## STUDENT

*Mike Solomon:* 2441 Laurelhurst Dr., University Heights, Ohio

Age 14: "I'm an s-f fan, also interested in ESP, radio, writing, swimming, and clarinet playing. Will look forward to hearing from others."

## DUTCH STUDENT

*Martin C. Hopman:* Nieuweweg 29A.S., Soest, Holland

Age 21: "I'm a college student majoring in sociology. I'd like to write to American boys and girls my age, about s-f and other subjects, including photography, anthropology, sailing, and music—from Strawinsky to Sinatra. I'd also like to receive American s-f magazines as they are exceedingly difficult to obtain here in Europe. I can exchange French and German magazines."

## STUDENT

*Sandy Chamberlain:* Box 71, Look-out Mountain, Tenn.

Age 18: "I'm a college freshman, s-f enthusiast, and an ardent student of hypnosis, especially its therapeutic applications. I enjoy riding, singing, and arguing! Will write to any interested."

## SWEDISH FAN

*Bertil Arvidsson:* Hasthagsterassen 17, Gustavsberg, Sweden

Age 30: "I'm very interested in science fiction and would appreciate hearing from American fans. Other interests include literature and stamp collecting."

## SWEDISH FAN

*Peter Bystrom:* Hyttlidgalan 58B, Skelleftea, Sweden

Age 12: "I'm a young s-f reader and fan, with interests including sports and photography. I sincerely hope American fans my age will write to me."

## HOUSEWIFE

*Mary Zukowski:* 1800 W. Tioga St., Philadelphia 40, Pa.

Age 36: "I'm a housewife, mother of four children. I enjoy science fiction—have been reading it since I was 11. I'd like to correspond with other fans."

## HOUSEWIFE

*Jeanne B. Wilson:* 658 S. 5th East, Brigham City, Utah

Age 32: "I'm a housewife with 2 boys and 3 girls. I like writing both letters and stories, collecting horse figurines, and cooking. Hope to contact other fans my age in this country and abroad."

## STUDENT

*Ronald Weston:* 1120 Penley Blvd., Salem, Va.

Age 13: "I'm interested in astronomy, archeology, mythology, anthropology, and, of course, s-f. Hope to hear from boys and girls my age."

## STUDENT

*Bill Murphy:* 207 S. Andre, Saginaw, Mich.

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# House Operator

by

*S. M. Jenneshaw*

**At poker, Rafferty knew he could beat any man alive. Now, needing money badly, he walked into the Ganymede Casino looking for a patsy . . .**

**R**AFFERTY WAS A GAMBLER of the old school. He didn't believe in any of the fancy electronic gadgets that the casinos went in for these days, didn't much care for the psionic games of chance and other tricky and probably rigged affairs. Give him a good poker game any time, and he would be happy.

He stood in the door of the Ganymede Casino, outlining himself against the gaudy lights flashing within, standing there patiently. Inside, the rich and would-be rich of a dozen planets were enjoying themselves, playing the brightly-lit games and throwing money around in handfuls.

Rafferty waited for some attention. His hand slid to the bulky roll in his pocket — one hundred hundred-credit bills, 10,000 smackers in all. It was all Rafferty had.

He was here to triple it, or else.

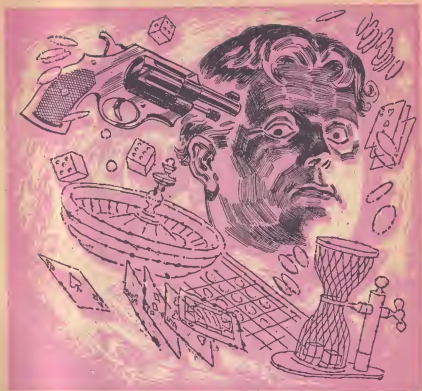
Tomorrow 30,000 had to be handed over to Lee Walsh. It was the result of the one mistake Rafferty had made.

Walsh was a big-time gambler, with ulcers and high blood pressure and ten million in the bank. Rafferty was straight middle-time, a man who genuinely enjoyed his chancy profession. And Walsh had said, "Why don't you play something I like to play? All the time poker, poker, poker. Why don't you switch to something else."

"I like poker," Rafferty said. "I win at poker. Why switch?"

Walsh seemed to stiffen. "Let's have a little game of planet-faro, Rafferty. Just you and me. I'm tired of all this poker."

"I don't like planet-faro. It's a lousy game. All those flashing lights — it's more like pinball than hon-



est-to-darn gambling."

"You ain't chicken, Rafferty?"

"Chicken?"

"Yeah. Let's try some planet-faro."

So they did — and Rafferty had sat by leadenly while Walsh cleaned him out. Thirty thousand shiny credits down the drain, and the debt due tomorrow at noon. You didn't welsh on Walsh, either. It

was sort of a slogan.

Rafferty didn't have the thirty thousand. He had two alternatives: he could scrape up the cash somewhere and hand it over, or he could grab an out-system liner and get going toward Aldebaran, and hope to live. He wouldn't — not for long.

He decided to scrape up the cash. And there was one sure way

to do that. Poker.

Poker was getting to be an unpopular game, and there were two reasons for it. One was the advent of more popular new types of gambling devices; the other reason was that Rafferty was so good it didn't pay to compete against him. He often had trouble getting up a game. People tended to slink away when they heard Rafferty wanted to play poker. He played it hard and he played it mean, and he didn't lose too often.

That was why he had come to the Ganymede Casino. On the big pleasure-moon, anyone could find some sort of game going — and if he couldn't, the house would be glad to provide some competition. Rafferty didn't much like the idea of playing a house operator, but he was confident.

He patted the ten g's and waited. After a couple of minutes an impeccably-dressed man in tails came over to him and smiled courteously.

"Yes, sir?"

"My name is Rafferty. I'm looking for a poker game in the house. There one around I can get into?"

The impeccable man frowned slightly. "I don't think so, Mr. — ah — Rafferty. Wouldn't you care to try our Roto, or the planet-faro, or robot roulette? We —"

"I want to play poker," Rafferty said. The chips were down now;

he had to stick to his specialty.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Would you wait here, please?"

Rafferty waited. He waited while the impeccable man cruised around the huge gameroom, murmuring gently to someone here, someone there. In all cases the response was the same: a shrug, a curious glance in Rafferty's direction, a quick and emphatic shake of the head.

No one wanted to play. Usually Rafferty could count on some fool millionarie anxious to try to best the great Rafferty at five-card stud. Not today, though. There were no takers.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rafferty; I couldn't seem to promote a game. But the planet-faro —"

"Poker," Rafferty said.

"Would you object to playing a two-handed game with one of our employees?" the usher asked suddenly. "Naturally he'll be staked by the house, and I think you'll find him fit competition for you."

Rafferty chewed at his lip. He needed the money — and if the house operator was staked by the casino, it might be possible to cart off quite a load.

"Okay," he grunted. "Bring on your skill."

THE USHER LED him to a small, highly-polished card table in the back, and signalled to a

man waiting to one side.

"Mr. Steel, this is Mr. Rafferty."

"Hello," Rafferty said.

"Pleased to meet you," said the other. His voice was a soft purr; his face, an expressionless mask. Rafferty smiled. He was quick to size up his opponents, and this time he could tell he was up against a good one.

"Chips?"

A house girl had come by. She was clad only in a strip of something filmy across her breasts and another round her middle, and she had a trayfull of chips. Rafferty casually handed her the hundred bills and accepted his stack of chips. She also gave him an unopened deck of cards.

"Care to?" Rafferty asked, offering the cards to his opponent.

"No. Go ahead."

Methodically Rafferty broke the seal, spilled the cards out, flipped the jokers to one side, and riffled through the deck. There were fifty-two of them, all right, and they looked good. He started to shuffle.

The first few hands passed quickly. Steel was a quiet, noncommittal player who seemed to have a tremendous reserve of calmness. It wasn't too surprising, thought Rafferty, considering it wasn't his dough at stake. But a shill has professional pride.

The first three deals were in the

nature of warmups, and Rafferty emerged from them twenty or thirty credits to the good. He felt the cards moving the right way; luck was with him tonight. He wondered if he could come away with a million. The Casino had no limit.

Fourth hand he decided to experiment with some offensive tactics. Steel dealt; Rafferty scooped up his cards and looked them over. Jack, Four, Eight, Seven, King. Spade, club, spade, heart, diamond. Coolly he fanned the cards out and pushed a hundred credits toward the middle of the table. Steel saw him.

"How many?"

"I'll stand pat."

"So will I."

"Five hundred," Rafferty said.

"See that and raise it a hundred."

"I'll bump to two."

"I'm with you," Steel said.

"What do you have?"

Without a facial flicker Rafferty exposed his hand. "Jack high. You?"

"You beat me. It's your kitty."

Rafferty scooped the pot in, frowning inwardly. He'd made his bluff — but Steel had been bluffing right along with him. It was only luck that the little man hadn't been holding a Queen.

Rafferty pulled Jack high again on the next deal, took three, came

up with nothing and folded. On the next hand both men played it cautiously and Rafferty dropped fifty credits when Steel's pair of kings took his tens.

Next deal, Rafferty again came up with nothing. Inwardly he cursed; the cards weren't coming as well as they had. He decided to bluff again, since the previous attempt hadn't yielded any information about his opponent's tactics.

This time he pushed the bet up to a thousand before calling.

"Three sevens," Steel said.

"You beat me," Rafferty said, and collapsed his hand.

"Mind if I look?" Steel said.

"Yes," said Rafferty. He was surprised; it was a rank amateur's trick to ask to look at a hand that had been tossed in. Coming from a cool customer like Steel, it didn't make much sense.

But slowly Rafferty began to fathom the way his opponent's mind worked. And slowly, as his genius for the game asserted itself, Rafferty began to win.

By 2100 his pile of chips totalled near fifty thousand. It was enough to pay off Walsh and still come out with a comfortable profit for the evening's work — but Rafferty didn't want to quit. He didn't play the game that way.

He decided to go for a killing. He had Steel figured, now and he

could take the house for a fortune.

Nursing three jacks and a pair of fours, he pushed the betting higher and higher. Steel kept right with him.

"Three thousand? I'll see you and raise one."

Without letting expression cross his face, Rafferty pushed a few more credits out. Then a few more. Then a few more. Five thousand credits hung on this deal, now.

He remained totally blank-faced. That was the secret of poker: never to tip off an opponent to anything. Steel was good, but Steel kept giving himself away.

Like now, for instance. Perhaps the shill didn't know it, but his right eyebrow was twitching faintly. So far, every time Steel had bluffed a weak hand, that eyebrow had twitched.

Well, now Rafferty had him. He had a full house; it was going to take a bunch of fancy cards to top it. And Steel was almost certainly bluffing.

"Six thousand," Rafferty said.

"Seven."

"Seven five."

It reached nine. Finally Rafferty said, "Okay. What do you have?"

Casually Steel lowered his hand. Jack, Queen, Queen, Queen Queen. That made four Queens.

He hadn't been bluffing.

And Rafferty was out nine thou-

sand credits.

HE KEPT HIS COMPOSURE, but inwardly he was disturbed. By all rights Steel *had* to be bluffing — but there they were, four queens.

The game progressed. A few curious onlookers had gathered. By playing cautiously, Rafferty started piling up chips again. His winnings mounted to a hundred thousand, hundred fifty. He had Steel figured now for sure.

But it wasn't as sure as all that.

Rafferty staked five thousand on a straight flush. Steel saw him and added five hundred on top of it.

"I'll go with you," Rafferty said. "Here's another thousand." Straight flush, Queen high. Only three hands could possibly beat him — and one of them was a royal flush. It didn't seem likely. Besides, the lower corner of Steel's mouth was drawn back, as it usually was when he had a fairly good hand and was playing it big.

The chips flew out madly. Rafferty watched the pile grow; neither man would let the cat die. Ten, twelve thousand credits now. Fifteen. In thirty years of poker, Rafferty had never had fifteen thousand credits riding on one hand. But he was sure he had it.

"What are you holding?" Steel asked finally.

"Straight flush, Queen high." He started to reach for the chips.

Steel's mild, purring voice interrupted him. "*What suit?*"

For the first time that night Rafferty's composure left him. "C-Clubs," he stammered.

"Spades," Steel said sweetly, and put down the eight to Queen, inclusive and consecutive.

It just didn't figure, Rafferty thought glumly. He wasn't as annoyed over the wild improbability of two straight flushes the same hand as he was because he had failed to guess Steel's facial reaction properly. He'd been dead wrong.

He got wronger. Steel sat calmly without saying a word except when necessary, and gobbled in the chips. It seemed to Rafferty that Steel was reading his every move.

He was holding two pair, and played it big. Steel stayed right with him, and when the payoff came:

"Three fours."

Three fours won. But Steel wouldn't have ridden that far on the trio unless he knew pretty well that Rafferty didn't have much to show. He seemed to *know*. And as the game progressed, he grew less and less readable himself. It was a strange reversal for Rafferty, who was accustomed to detect his opponent's idiosyncrasies within three



deals and to play them mercilessly from then on.

"Two kings," Rafferty said.

"Two aces."

Rafferty looked down at his pile of chips and counted them. Eight hundred credits left. Eight hundred lousy credits.

It was just enough to book passage to Aldebaran. Rafferty slumped in his chair.

The gambler in him urged him to go on, to try to win the thirty thousand he needed and clear out. But another part of him told him it was futile; Steel was getting sharper and sharper, and it was inevitable he'd lose even the remaining eight hundred. He didn't want that to happen.

He rose stiffly.

"Had enough?" Steel asked.

"I think so."

"I hope I haven't discouraged you. We can still play some more, if you like?"

"What's the use?" Rafferty said hollowly. "I can't win. And at least this way I'll be on Aldebaran tomorrow when Walsh and his gunmen come looking for me."

"What's that?"

"Never mind." Rafferty turned away, scooping up his remaining chips. He cashed them in and shambling out the door, still unable fully to understand that for the first time in his life he had met

his master at the poker table.

AFTER RAFFERTY was gone, the impeccable usher came over to Steel, who was sitting patiently by the huge pile of chips.

"You clean him out?"

"Just about," Steel said. "He had a little left to book passage with."

"It looked bad for a while, there. He was better than a hundred thousand ahead of you."

"It took me some time to detect his playing patterns," the house man said. "He was very, very good. He's the best player I've ever encountered."

"But he couldn't beat you, natch!"

"Hardly. Once I had penetrated his defenses, he was at my mercy." Steel rose, smiling blandly. "I took 9200 credits from him. It's thirsty work. How about a drink?"

"Sure thing," the impeccable man said. "I guess I can spare a drink for the best house operator this casino has." He took an oilcan from his jacket and inserted it at the back of Steel's neck. The robot grinned happily at the lubrication; his soft photonic eyes beamed.

"I enjoy playing poker," Steel said. "But someday you must enlarge my circuits so I can take part in planet-faro too. It looks like a very interesting game."



"I think we can cure those dizzy spells,  
but we'll have to remove your satellite."



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

*Conducted by Henry Bott*

*Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.*

**THE NAKED SUN**

*by Isaac Asimov, \$2.95, 187 pages Doubleday and Company Inc., Garden City, New York.*

Elijah Baley, detective extraordinary, of the New York police, is sent to the planet Solaria to resolve a murder and to discover weaknesses in Solarian society, weaknesses which will enable Earth to triumph in the expected war.

Baley is the hero of the novel "Caves of Steel", and the story wanders through the complex metal jungle of that book. An involved and complicated robot joins the protagonist in probing matters.

A rather nice conceit in the story has the Solarians transacting all affairs via television. "Seeing" is abhorred.

While I did not like the story, I

cannot, in good conscience, condemn it. Many people buy and read Asimov's books. I will say, perhaps this is to your taste. If so, you may enjoy it.

While on the subject of Asimov's writings, it would not be amiss to suggest you read his latest non-fiction work, a first-rate exposition of the principles of atomic and nuclear physics. As an introduction to the subject it is excellent. The popularization of science, becoming more important as it is, is sadly in need of good expositors. Asimov demonstrates here a felicitous approach to a ponderous subject.

The audience for quality science writing is growing. If you share this increasing taste, I recommend Asimov's work.

## THE SECRET PEOPLE

by Raymond F. Jones, 224 pages, \$2.50, Avalon Books, 22 East 60th St., New York 22, N.Y.

This book treats a theme that may be nearer than we think. In a post atomic war world, the legacy of radioactive dust is a greatly decreased fertility in people. In such a world genetics and policy are all-important.

And when the few people capable of reproducing themselves, produce not "normal" children but near geniuses and telepaths, a jealous world tries to turn on them.

Jones is not the first to handle this idea, but he does so in a polished, captivating way.

Jones manages to sustain an amazingly tense atmosphere as he describes the hero's efforts to prevent the powerful Rossi Committee from hunting down the so-called "Deviates" — the supra-normals.

Amidst an abundance of second rate fiction it is a pleasant surprise to encounter an entertaining story such as this. No profundities emerge and no extraordinary developments occur but you are given a first-rate story.

Jones can be relied upon to produce a good story. He's not one of s-f's greats, but then he's not at the bottom either.

Look into "The Secret People."

## EMPIRE OF THE ATOM

by A. E. van Vogt, \$3.00, 192 pages, Shasta Publishers, 5525 Blackstone, Chicago 37, Ill.

In spite of Damon Knight's merciless dissection of the van Vogt *Uebermensch*, and which ordinarily would cause me to come to this story armed for blood, to my surprise, I found myself enjoying it.

In a neat analog of the Italian Renaissance, this 120th Century thriller traces the intricacies of rebuilding a world shattered by the atom, in the terms of, as the book jacket has it, "... the parallel between the Florentine Medici and the Dynasty of Linn, for Medron is a fitting successor to Cosimo, and Clane is truly a Lorenzo *il Magnifico*."

Among von Vogt's faults surely is not his gift for the felicitous name, a failing so many science fic-

tion writers are prone to. In fact, some might carp that the resemblance to the magnificent rolling Italian names of the city-states and their leaders, is too marked for comfort. I prefer that to a "Glug" or a "Threep."

As usual this is an exciting chase story, done with less van Vogt irritability with superman emphasis, than usual.

Technology has never been van Vogt's forte nor is it here, but that really is irrelevant, since more than the bare bones of a plot exist, and the characterization is excellent.

I had not imagined that I would be enjoying this story; I came to it prejudiced by previous encounters. But as it turns out, I enjoyed it immensely and I heartily recommend this novel. (Editor's note: Turn to page 130 for your FREE copy.)

# SATELLITE OF DEATH

by

Randall Garrett

**Five men were stationed on Earth's space satellite when the alien starship moored itself nearby. So the question—who would investigate?**

THERE WERE FIVE aboard the orbiting wheel in the sky—an American, a Russian, a Frenchman, an Englishman, an Indian. Their job was to keep watch—over each other. The Wheel held enough fission-fusion bombs to blast all of Earth but the five watchdogs saw to it that those bombs remained stored, a potential threat and no more to aggressors below.

And then Gregson and Lal discovered the alien spaceship moored outside Supplementary Airlock One.

It looked like no spaceship they had ever set eyes on before. Gregson, the American, said, "You see that thing out there?"

The Indian, Lal, nodded and rubbed his aquiline nose reflectively. "I see it—but what is it?"

"Spaceship of some kind," said Gregson. "Damndest-looking spaceship I've ever seen, though. Looks

like it's moored near the airlock. Wonder if we have visitors?"

He peered at the ship. It had little in common with the streamlined dumbbells Earth used for spaceflight; it was slim and tapering, with no visible rocket orifices; it was made of some strange iridescent metal that glimmered in the moonlight.

"Let's investigate," Gregson said.

"We should call the others," said Lal. "All five should be on hand."

"You're right." Gregson touched his belt-stud, giving the signal that called all five crewmen to hand. They appeared quickly—Lasseux, Beveridge, Golovunoff. Silently, Gregson pointed through the viewplate at the newcomer.

After a long look Beveridge shook his head. "That didn't come from Earth," the Englishman said. "Not unless they've developed an entirely new drive principle. And look at the design..."



"That's an alien spaceship, all right," Lasseux said.

"From the stars," added Golovunoff. A cold chill seemed to sweep through the space satellite as he spoke the words.

Quietly Gregson said, "We'd better go out there and see what's inside. Since Lal and I saw the ship first, we'll be the ones to go look."

"No," said Golovunoff. "I wish

to go also."

"I'd rather like to get first look too," said Beveridge.

"I think we'd all better go," Lasseux suggested. "The station can operate without us for a while. And we'll never agree on who's to go, eh?"

**FIVE FIGURES** IN spacesuits clustered about the alien ship. At close range its iridescent skin

looked other-worldly and vaguely frightening, gleaming purple and green and dull-bronze by moonlight. A quartz window gave a view of the ship's interior.

"I don't see anyone in there," said Gregson. "You?"

"Looks empty to me," commented Beveridge.

"Empty! Impossible!" said Lasseux vehemently. "Empty spaceships do not pilot themselves across the void to Earth. Empty spaceships do not complicatedly moor themselves outside a space-satellite's airlock. Empty spaceships..."

"That's enough, Lasseux," growled the Russian. "Whether it makes sense or no, that spaceship's empty."

"Let's find the hatch," suggested Lal. "Perhaps there's someone injured inside, out of the line of sight."

The five Earthmen covered the surface of the ship, looking for an exterior hatch control. Beveridge found it first—a narrow lever extruding a few inches from the skin of the alien vessel. He called to the others, then yanked down on the lever. The hatch pivoted back, opening into an airlock.

There was the usual moment of Alphonse-Gaston as the five crewmen jockeyed for position, none willing to let any of the others get ahead of him on anything. Then

Lasseux slipped through and into the alien spaceship, followed by Gregson and Beveridge almost simultaneously, and then Golovunoff and Lal.

The ship *was* empty.

There was not the slightest sign of life. The five men roamed through the vessel, noting the utterly alien control - panel, the strange furnishings, the peculiar fixtures and appurtenances. But the ship was void of life.

Finally they returned to the Wheel and, puzzled, discussed the situation.

"It makes no sense," objected Lasseux. The small Frenchman was plainly obsessed with the inconsistency of the thing. "The ship crosses the interstellar void.... alone? Can remote control extend so far?"

"Looks like it did," said Gregson.

"Impossible!" Lasseux sputtered.

"In any case," said Beveridge, "we have a prize—a gift from the stars. An alien spaceship, free and without strings of any kind. We should notify Earth of our find."

"Do you suppose, said Lal, "that the pilot of that ship may be around yet?"

"Huh?" From Gregson and Beveridge at the same time.

"What I mean is, suppose that pilot is not like you and me—

suppose, that is, that he is invisible? Perhaps he is still aboard his ship, and we passed over him unknowing? Or perhaps he has come right in here with us and listens to our very words?"

Gregson shuddered. "You've got a wild imagination, Lal. But we have enough problems on our hands without worrying about ghosts from outer space."

"I said not ghosts—"

"Enough," boomed Golovunoff. "We can continue this silly quarrel indefinitely. Let us assume, since we see no one and nothing aboard the ship, that it arrived empty. And therefore that it is ours for study."

"Do empty ships moor themselves to airlock hatches?" asked the Frenchman sarcastically. "I tell you Lal's right—there must have been intelligence guiding that ship!"

Gregson shook his head. "No. Listen to me, will you? We built this satellite station jointly, as a global watch-station. But does that mean that everything the satellite discovers is to be shared equally?"

"Of course," said Beveridge.

"Then how do we divide that spaceship into five equal parts? Whose country gets it?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Lal said, "We'll turn it over

to the United Nations. They can let all nations examine it freely."

For once there was general agreement. "Good idea," Gregson said approvingly, and then the five went back to their tasks aboard the satellite.

THE SATELLITE had been in space less than a year. The development of spaceflight had put an end to the possibility of war on Earth by bringing into being a watchdog for the uneasy planet.

Put a satellite in the sky. Arm it with enough fission-fusion bombs to blast any country to flinders. Man it with a squad chosen from the leading countries of the world and let them keep watch over one another. Any threat of aggression on the mother planet could easily be squashed by the more potent threat of blazing vengeance from the skies. The satellite was the guardian of the world's peace.

The five men chosen to be the first crew were almost ideal for the job — sensitive, intelligent men, skilled in the techniques of spaceflight, loyal to the countries of their birth. There wouldn't be any chance of collusion among them, of a conspiracy against one country or against Earth itself, as some feared.

Their tasks for the hours immediately after the discovery of the strange spaceship were mostly



routine; Lal dictated a comprehensive report on the spaceship and beamed it to United Nations Headquarters on Earth, while Beveridge and Golovunoff, spacesuited, filmed the alien ship from every conceivable angle, inside and out. Lasseux and Gregson tended to the workings of the satellite, overseeing the cybernetic governors which had the actual responsibility of operating the big wheel in the sky.

Lasseux was cook that night, according to the strict rotation that had been set up. The men ate a strange meal; their spirits seemed oddly dampened by the spaceship that had so unpredictably come into their midst. Lal's words preyed on them despite themselves. Suppose there had been an invisible alien aboard that ship? Suppose he lurked aboard the wheel this very moment?

"Suppose," said Beveridge suddenly, "that alien ship was an invasion scout."

"What's that?" Gregson asked.

"What I mean is, the advance guard of an invasion force. The alien finds the satellite and, being telepathic, parks here a while to see what's going on." He giggled self-consciously. "I'm speaking imaginatively, of course. The alien moors here and reads our minds; finds out we have a load of bombs here that can blow up the works down there. So he comes drifting

out of the ship and takes over someone of us here. When no one else is looking—*poof!*—Earth is destroyed like that!" Again Beveridge giggled.

Gregson looked at him sourly. "You better leave those crazy magazines alone, Beveridge."

But Lasseux interjected, "We should devote careful attention to what he has said. There may be a grain of truth in it. After all, *who moored the spaceship?*"

A moment's silence. Then the Russian said, "Assuming one of us is an alien—not that I believe Beveridge's fanciful story — how would we know? Until Earth is destroyed, that is?"

"That's just it," said Lal gloomily. "We *wouldn't* know. Not until it was too late."

WHAT BEGAN as Beveridge's dinner-table joke soon became an earnestly-held belief. Perhaps it was the strain of life aboard the satellite, 10,000 miles above the Earth's surface. Perhaps the tensions of a year's isolation from the rest of humanity were taking their toll. But, from a dinnertable jest, the concept soon became a source of serious discussion. And tension.

Tension wrapped cold fingers around them as the days passed. They agreed to operate in teams, never to let one out of another's

sight, always to keep constant watch . . . for there was no way of telling which of them harbored in his body or his mind Earth's potential destroyer.

Two days passed this way, and a third. Then Lal went for a walk in space — without a suit.

"He cracked," Gregson said, staring at the Indian's corpse. "This crazy alien business—it just broke him apart."

"Yes," Lasseux said moodily. "The tension. . . the looking and spying. . . he couldn't take it any more. Our first casualty. But not the last, I fear."

Beveridge and Gregson brought Lal's body in — it was orbiting around the Wheel — and a brief funeral service was conducted. The Indian's body was fed to the atomic converters that ran the station and consumed in an instant's blaze of light.

Lasseux radioed Earth and gave them a full account of the tragedy. He was told that a replacement for Lal would be on his way within a week or two.

"Now there are just four of us," he said, turning from the radio. "It will make keeping watch easier. I will team with Goluvonoff for the rest of the day; you two English-speakers can work together."

They did. It was a cold, cheerless day. The little Indian had

everyone's spirits.

Then Beveridge suggested, "Perhaps Lal was the one carrying the alien. When he discovered the truth he ran out into space, killing himself and the alien. . .?"

"No," Gregson said. "Why would he wait so long? Lal was the type to do such a thing the moment he found out. Besides, the alien wouldn't be bothered by space if it has no body."

"Damn; you're right. Just trying to cheer things, old man. Just trying . . ."

Suddenly the sound of a pistol-shot echoed through the chambers of the space satellite. The crewmen always carried pistols as safeguards against one another.

"You hear that?" Gregson said. Beveridge nodded.

Moments later Lasseux came running into the chamber, muttering excitedly and incoherently to himself in French. He carried a smoking gun in his hand. Gregson and Beveridge immediately drew but Lasseux raised his other hand and dropped the gun.

"Calm yourself!" Gregson ordered, shaking Lasseux roughly. "Calm down! What happened!"

The flow of French finally ceased. Lasseux made a visible effort added an exotic spark to the group that was missing now and the tragic nature of his death dampened

to master himself and said. "Golovunoff — the Russian — *he* was the alien!"

"What?"

"I saw him change shape," Lasseux gasped. "He seemed to waver for a moment when he thought I wasn't looking. The edges of his body blurred. It was awful! Then he saw me — and I shot him!"

"Is he dead?"

"Yes! Yes! I sealed off the chamber, so the alien couldn't escape if it's still alive." Lasseux was trembling violently. Beveridge and Gregson, pale, stared at him.

"Two men dead," Gregson said. "And we don't know if we've killed the creature yet. Or if there really is a creature," he added more silently to himself.

Then — "Great God! *Lasseux!*"

Gregson gaped. The Frenchman was . . . *wavering*. It was the only way to describe it. He seemed to be blurring and shifting mistily, but only for an instant.

An instant was long enough. Gregson had his gun out and pumped three shots into Lasseux's body. The Frenchman looked incredulously at him a moment, then crumpled.

Gregson took four steps back and let the gun drop from his

nerveless fingers. "It was a trick," he said in a half-whisper. "He killed the Russian and made up the story about him — but he couldn't control his own wavering! Lucky thing I got him first, wasn't it?" He turned to Beveridge for confirmation, but the Englishman was gazing at him sternly, coldly, almost angrily.

"He *was* wavering, wasn't he?" Gregson asked. "You saw it too—that sort of blurring?" The American knotted his hands tensely. "Well, now the alien's dead — unless it's taken a new host. You don't think that's possible, do you, Beveridge? I mean, if you shoot the body it's in, can it hop to the next person like that? Do you think. . ."

"Yes," said the Englishman. "I think so."

He was wavering.

But *he* held the gun.

Gregson yelled once and charged madly toward Beveridge. The bullet caught him in mid-run and sent him spinning back toward the crumpled corpse of Lasseux. Coldly, Beveridge fired twice more, then stopped wavering.

Ten minutes later, the rain of bombs began to shower down on Earth.

THE END

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LUTHER  
SCHEFFY

**"You go ahead and investigate. I'll guard the ship."**



*Conducted by Robert Bloch*

ONE EVENING in late May, 1955, I found myself in a way-side restaurant on the outskirts of a small town in western Ohio. In an effort to escape the caterwaulings of a juke-box, I took refuge in the men's washroom.

It was a dingy little cubicle which would never have won the approval of Duncan Hines, or whoever it is who goes around recommending men's washrooms to the discriminating public. As a matter of fact, it was downright depressing in there. The walls were a sort of dirty gray; they offered the sort of surface which invites morons to whip out a pencil and inscribe their obscenities.

I stood there for a long moment, wondering if it might not be better to go outside again and face the assault of the juke-box which was playing (as I recall it) a number entitled WHEN I GROW TOO

OLD TO SCREAM I'LL HAVE YOU TO DISMEMBER. It wasn't much of a choice—suffer the sound or risk claustrophobia here inside. Above all, I dreaded the vulgarity which might assault my eyes on these walls.

Sure enough, as I lifted my gaze, I noted a pencilled inscription. Wearily, I read the legend. Then my eyes sparkled, my shoulders straightened, and my entire being was suffused with new faith, new hope, the courage to go on.

For there, my friends, on the wall of that little public washroom in an obscure restaurant in the wilds of the Midwest, I saw these inspiring words—"First Fandom Is Not Dead!"

It is one of those things which can happen only once in a lifetime.

To be more specific, it is one of those things which can happen only

at a MidWestCon.

The MidWestCon (a rose by any other name would still smell) is an annual gathering of science fiction fans and fanciers which has attained its eighth anniversary this year.

The first gathering was an informal affair; a little group of Ohio fans met at the home of C.L. Barrett, M.D., in Bellefontaine, to examine his notable collection of science fiction books and magazines. Out of this informal bull-session grew the notion of holding a yearly meeting. Accordingly, the next event was planned for a resort hotel at nearby Indian Lake. Prime movers in sponsoring and arranging the affair were (and still are) Dr. Barrett, Don Ford, Lou Tabakow, Stan Skirvin and Roy Lavender. A limited bit of publicity resulted in a surprisingly large turnout from surrounding areas, and the second session became a two-day affair, with a banquet.

I didn't show up until the third year, 1952, and by this time the MidWestCon was already well on its way to becoming an entrenched institution. There were fans from Chicago and New York and virtually every point in between; fans from Florida and fans from Canada. Plus Arthur C. Clarke, just in from England.

In succeeding years the MidWestCon has moved its meeting-site twice; first to the actual town of Bellefontaine, and—for the past two years—to a 100-unit motel, complete with swimming-pool, on the outskirts of Cincinnati.

And yet, despite its growth and popularity, the general spirit of the MidWestCon prevails; a com-

pletely informal, unplanned, unprogrammed gathering with only a single banquet-type meal at which anyone attempts to indulge in introductions, speeches or formal remarks. It's still a bull-session on an expanded scale.

Why do fans literally break down the doors in an effort to attend? Probably because it is a bull-session. Probably because there is more general visiting and impromptu entertainment than is generally available at an organized convention. Probably because the handwriting on the washroom wall contained a meaningful message. First Fandom is *Not* Dead—and the MidWestCon is about as close to the customs and spirit of First Fandom as it's possible to come nowadays.

As these lines are being written, I have just returned from the Eighth Annual MidWestCon, where I acquired a slight cold in the nose—so I might as well give a running account of the affair.

After a flight which set aviation back thirty years, I arrived at the Cincinnati airport (conveniently located about 200 miles away, in Kentucky) and proceeded by a series of buses to the motel on Thursday evening. As I stumbled into the driveway I gazed up at the face of the main building. Peering out of the second-story window and frantically waving a deck of cards was Bob Tucker. Within a few minutes we were eating supper together at the restaurant across the way, and the convention was officially launched.

Tucker, a conventioneer of long experience, has learned to take no chances. He brought his wife, Fern, his teen-age son, Bob, Jr., and little

David Tucker—thus insuring that no matter whether anyone else bothered to attend, he'd still have at least four people present for a poker game.

Tucker—and to some extent, yours truly—bears the reputation of being an inveterate poker-player at these affairs. Actually, we generally play poker only when it rains; and can we help it if it usually rains at a MidwestCon?

As a matter of fact, it started raining the moment I set foot in Cincinnati—I rode the storm from Chicago on the plane, under such bumpy circumstances that many of my fellow-passengers literally gave up in despair.

SO AFTER our meal, the Tucker family and I repaired to the Seascape Lounge in the basement of the motel and collected a few other early birds for a brief workout. The rain poured steadily, and there were gloomy mutterings about lost weekends. Shortly before midnight, Martin Greenberg and a companion arrived from New York.

His companion, a Dr. Asimov, is a professor of biochemistry at an eastern university, and a singularly antisocial type in that he neither smokes, drinks, nor plays cards. I have encountered this individual before, but it was not until reading some book-reviews by Henry Bott that I discovered that he is also a writer of science fiction. We exchanged a few pleasantries, designed to put this shy, retiring fellow at his ease, and then he decided to retire. So did we all, hoping for better weather on Friday.

Friday it rained. First it rained water, then it rained people. They

flowed in all day long: the Indiana mob, the Detroit gang, the Pittsburgh outfit, the Ohio hoods, the Chicago syndicate. The Seascape Lounge became littered with copies of YANDRO and the bodies of visitors. Before Tucker and I realized what had happened we were involved in a poker game with Gertrude M. Carr, who beat us handily.

L. Sprague de Camp showed up, with a 16-year-old son and a 16-day-old beard: the former being quite handsome. The Double-E contingent was out in force—E.E. Smith and E.E. Evans. Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton drifted in. William D. Grant lugged his projector and films from Canada. F.M. and Elinor Busby came from Seattle—like G.M. Carr, they'd travelled all the way from the West Coast for the affair. Bob Silverberg and Barbara appeared from New York; so did Jean Carrol. By supper-time there were almost a hundred people sitting around cursing the rain.

Blushing at the unseemly language, the rain withdrew. Its absence was unnoted as the assemblage hailed the arrival of the Cleveland contingent, headed by the Falascas, and the addition of Betty Sullivan, plus Bea and Pat Mahaffey.

Parties sprang up literally overnight. I spent the evening in Greenberg's room, chaperoned by about eight other people. As an old convention-goer, I have learned how to avoid even the hint of scandal: I never permit myself to go to anyone else's room unless I'm sure there are going to be females present.

Saturday was a scorcher. The sun

shone brilliantly, and the motel swimming-pool was the natural gathering-place. About forty deck-chairs and chaise-lounges were occupied by fans and pros, and the water was filled by a lot of amateur Arthur C. Clarke types.

Boyd Raeburn, Ron Kidder and Gerry Steward showed up from Canada by way of Fond du Lac and Weyauwega, where they'd visited Dean Grennell and myself during the past week. It was good to see them again, although they were forced to park their MG and Austin-Healy outside, by strict orders of the management. When they'd stayed at my place they brought the cars inside and took them to bed with them.

More and more people circulated. Jim Harmon and Thomas N. Scortia, P. Schuyler Miller, Marvin Mines from Chicago, Bob Madle, Stuart Hoffman—but a further listing would make this a catalogue.

At the dinner-hour, about a hundred and thirty of the group moved down the road to another restaurant for the traditional banquet. It was a smorgashord setup, and since most people got a chance to fill their plates before George Nims Raybin, nobody went hungry. Following the meal came the speeches, awards, and insults—mostly the latter.

Then L. Sprague de Camp conducted a debate and vote on the methods of selecting future candidates for the TransAtlantic Fan Fund. Four systems were discussed. The method eventually agreed upon entitles each voter to cast his ballot for a single candidate. The candidate receiving the most votes is adjudged the winner. If he cannot

accept, then the candidate receiving second place gets the trip; if he is also unable to go, the third choice automatically goes.

Bill Grant, who had been showing movies off and on during the previous evening, now took over to run films from English conventions, plus loaned documentaries on the NYC on and other fannish con-claves.

Meanwhile, back at the motel, the parties were starting again. I found myself eventually in the Cleveland suite, sprawled on the floor in a corner (we old convention-goers have a sensible motto—"When you go to a party, it's better to lie down right away than to fall down later") and there I stayed, suitably chaperoned.

Sunday was ideal for swimming, so a number of us pooled our interests while others made preparations for departure. The last hours of a MidwestCon are always saddening to the group; by the time nightfall arrives, the few die-hards get a feeling that they're sconsced in a Civil War Veteran's Home, watching their companions gradually thin ranks and disappear forever.

After the evening movies were concluded, a small group of us gathered at the poolside in the darkness and held a miniature wake. A nice guy named Ed Chamberlain offered to drive me to the airport the next morning, and it served as a typical reminder of just how many kindnesses are forever being offered at these affairs. I found myself discussing one of the peculiarities afflicting inveterate conventiongoers; the odd feeling, growing with the years, that wherever



one goes throughout the nation one will inevitably run into the same people. You see them at New Orleans, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Cleveland, New York, Cincinnati, and you are finally convinced that they're *always* going to be present when you arrive in a strange town. They come alive for you at every convention; they're your old and intimate friends; you share common memories of good times together. It doesn't seem right to see them disappear for another year.

Of course, as usual, there were some folks who perhaps didn't mix or mingle as freely as the old guard. But they were in the minority. For most of us this MidWestCon, as always in the past, was in the old fannish tradition.

Even if Gertrude M. Carr *did* beat me at poker.

I'm sure that a similar situation prevailed a week later, at the WestCon. There's nothing quite like these get-togethers, and I'm firmly convinced that when science fiction fans go to Heaven, they'll find it's just a smoke-filled room.

If they go to Hell, I'm doubly sure of it . . .

But now, let's get at the fanzines before we run out of space.

YANDRO (the Coulsons, 407½ E. 6th St., No. Manchester, Indiana: 10c. 12/\$1: monthly) rolls merrily along with a full quota of its usual and unusual contributors. The editors, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Alan Dodd, Ray Schaffer, Don Wilgus and Thomas Stratton constitute the former group—and old-time fan Edward Wood epitomizes the latter in this instance. Ed elects to skirmish with JWC, Jr., this

time around, and as always he writes provocatively and well.

TWIG (Guy E. Terwilleger, 1412 Albright St., Boise Idaho: 10c. 6/50c: irreg.) bows in with its No. 4 appearance in a MAD COMICS issue. It goes to prove an old Idaho saying—"Boise will be Boise". In addition to the MAD take-off features (no, I'm not referring to the nude femme illos) there are contributions by regular columnist Alan Dodd, an article on his artwork by Dan Adkins, and an expression of teen-age attitude by Johnny Holleman which speaks for itself.

VOID No. 10 (the Benfords, c/o Lt. Col J. A. Benford, G-4 Sect., HQ. V Corps, APO 79, New York, N.Y.: 15c: irreg) is a big issue with a continental contributor lineup, largely. Ron Bennett, Boyd Raeburn and Eric Bentcliffe discuss THE JOB OF AN EDITOR in a spirited fashion, John Berry does one of his stories, Julian Parr reviews, Kent Moomaw contributes an interesting viewpoint on the current state of affairs in the sf field, and there are plenty of other features—including a big letter-section—to round out an excellent issue.

SPHERE (P.O. Box 196, Cantonment, Florida: 20c: bi-monthly) offers its No. 4 issue with a definite emphasis on fiction, but to me the highlight was the ASIMOV PROFILE, an article by Valkon which concentrates wisely on the Asimov working methods rather than the auctorial facade which is usually discussed in biographical attempts of this sort. If you're an Asimov fan (and many people are, including Asimov) you'll want this issue.

MUZZY No. 10 (Claude R. Hall, 502 S. Mesa, Carlsbad, N.M.: no price: irreg.) starts off with a Plato Jones cover illustrating that old popular song, *I Saw Mommy Kicking Santa Claus* and goes on from there; letters, reviews, editorializings, and articles by Aga Yonder and Alan Dodd make up the bulk of an informal issue which will undoubtedly be out of print before this review hits the stands. However, No. 11 will be available to those who write requesting it, so better drop a line to the editor.

METROFAN (Dick Ellington, 98 Suffolk St., Apt. 3A, New York 2, N.Y.: 50c a year: monthly) is the unofficial organ of the Eastern Science Fiction Association and the New York Science Fiction Circle. As such, it is of special interest to those dwelling east of the Appalachians, although there is news of general import included—such as a progress report on Randall Garrett's mustache which the editor seems to think is unhirsutable. Read the next issue for further hair-raising developments.

RETRIBUTION No. 6 (John Berry, 31 Campbell Park Avenue, Belmont, Belfast, N.I.: 15c: irreg.) boasts an allstar lineup, headed by the editor, his spouse, Walter Willis, his spouse, and a bevy of others. Atom illustrations enhance this publication, which deals with the saga of the Goon, fandom's own private eye. Forty-nine pages of British witticisms. . . plus a few stateside comments as well.

TRIODE No. 10 (Eric Bentcliffe, Terry Jeeves: subs. to Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis 22, Minn: 7/\$1: quarterly) is a thoroughly consistent 'zine

which might almost be a companion-piece to RETRIBUTION. Featuring the ubiquitous Berry, the final installment of his FUTURE HISTORY OF FANDOM, plus the array of artists and articulate articles typical of an Anglofanzine.

THE NEW FUTURIAN No. 7 (Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Ave., Hyattsville, Md.: irreg. 15c) is in actuality edited by oldtime fan John Michael Rossenblum of England. A glance at the green, Atomized cover should be enough to convince you of the fact: if not, it's only necessary to note the contributions by Walter Gillings, Eric Bentcliffe, and Betty Rosenblum for further corroboration—and enjoyment. Harry Warner Jr. continues his dissertation on music, this time discussing Sibelius. He warns, however, that unless there's a spectacular public demand, he won't write any more on the subject. Well, Harry, consider this a "spectacular public demand"—you always have something interesting to say, and I find your musical notes particularly appealing.

SCIENCE FICTION WORLD (Gnome Press, 80 E. 11th St., New York 3, N.Y.: irreg.: 10c) is with us again, its contents revealing the masterly hand of Bob Tucker and the grubby pawprints of the editor of this column. This assemblage of fresh news and stale jokes goes to a distribution and mailing group of approximately 30,000 people—several of whom actually seem to read it.

BRILLIG (Lars Bourne, 2436½ Portland St., Eugene, Oregon: irreg.: 25c) comes forth with its 2nd Annish, the eighth to appear. I suppose that like many another fan I've been spoiled when it comes

to spectacular Annishues, with the result that this specimen seems ordinary by comparison. It's interesting, but the material hardly lives up to the standards set by the Kenneth Patchen interlineations.

OOPSLA No. 21 (Gregg Calkins, 1068 Third Avenue, Salt Lake City 3, Utah: quarterly: 25c) is an entirely different breed of cat. Consider this lineup—John W. Campbell, Jr., H.L. Gold, Terry Carr, Harlan Ellison, Walter Willis, John Berry, Dean A. Grennell, and editor Calkins himself. No need to review in detail: the names alone are a guarantee that OOPSLA continues to live up to its reputation as one of the Top Ten. You'd have to go a long way to find a better and more consistently enjoyable job—but why bother, when you can just sit down and read this one?

HYPHEN No. 18 (Chuck Harris, "Carolyn", Lake Ave., Rainham, Essex, England: irreg: 15c) is also up to par. Walt Willis in this instance relinquishes his editorial chores to friend Harris, as noted, but bobs up with a column. Also on hand are William F. Temple, John Berry, Bob Shaw, Ermengarde Fiske, James White, and the inimitable Atom, plus a few remarks from the imitable editor of this column. Again, the line-up tells the story.

By this time you should be aware that FANTASY TIMES has changed its name to SCIENCE-FICTION TIMES. But its policy of bringing the latest news in the sf world to fandom on a bi-weekly basis is still unchanged, and so has the address (P.O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, N.J.: 10c per issue). SCIENCE-FIC-

TION TIMES is anxious to improve its format, and is beating the brush for new subscribers. If you're interested in the pro field, you'll find it well worth your while to send for a sub.

MUZZY No. 17 (Claude Hall, 2214 San Antonio, Austin 5, Texas: irreg.: 20c) features an interview with Chad Oliver and what editor Hall describes as a "PLAYBOY-ISH" approach in a nice fat issue.

ABERRATION No. 2 (Kent Mowmaw, 6705 Bramble Ave, Cincinnati 27, Ohio: irreg.: no price) can be obtained by comment, contribution or trade, and the outstanding features of this issue are items by Bob Silverberg, Dick Ellington and Dean Grennell—the editor of this column usually takes a dim view of fan fiction, but the Ellington yarn in this issue seemed worthy of a place in a fantasy prozine.

EXCELSIOR No. 3 (L Shaw, 545 Manor Road, Staten Island 14, N.Y.: irreg.: 15c, 7/\$1) is, as the editor's name attests, the product of Lee Hoffman Shaw, fandom's answer to Lizzie Borden. As usual, she manages to take forty whacks at various pretensions and pettifoggery, aided and abetted by a forty-first whack named Larry. This may sound facetious, but actually it's a serious recommendation.

ETHERLINE (Ian J. Crozier, 6 Bramerton Road, Caulfield, S.E. 8, Victoria, Australia: irreg.: 13/\$1) features Forrest J. Ackerman's column on Hollywood doings. Ackerman manages to report on every possible film, up to and including that found on George Pal's teeth. In addition, ETHERLINE continues its AUTHOR STORY LISTING, and this time the subject is

Alfred Bester. A rinkum do.

Rather than comment on the most recent issue of Len J. Moffatt's **SCIENCE FICTION PARADE**, I'll devote this paragraph to informing you of an advertisement therein. It offers a collection entitled **THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF RICK SNEARY**, with printed cover by Woolston and a back cover by Atom. Not for sale, you can get a copy by merely donating 25c or more to the **WAW TO THE GATE IN '58 FUND**. It seems that, according to tradition of long standing, South Gate is bidding for the '58 World Science Fiction convention, and the fans out thataway want to raise money for the purpose of importing Walt Willis and family—presumably, they will be placed on exhibit at the affair. So this booklet has been prepared, and donations are in order. Send cash, not stamps, to Len J. Moffatt, 5969 Lanto Street, Bell Gardens, California. As one who had the pleasure of meeting Willis in 1952, I am in favor of this project—if only to discover what kind of a woman would put up with him all these years. As one who has read Rick Sneary for many years, I can recommend his efforts, if not his spelling.

Earlier in this column I had things to say about the MidWestCon. If you're interested in the personalities sponsoring this affair, you can find out all about them by sending for a copy of **THE CIN-CINNATI FANTASY GROUP** (Donald Ford, Box 19T, R.R. 2, Wards Corner Rd., Loveland, Ohio: one-shot: 25c). Here's a complete *dossiere* on, and by, Ohio fandom: the story of the MidWestCon and

how it grew, together with anecdotes and personality profiles. Amusing, entertaining, and vastly instructive—shows how this insidious little pressure-group has worked quietly behind the scenes for years, preparing to take over fandom and, no doubt, eventually the entire country. Absolutely the finest thing of its kind since **MEIN KAMPF**.

**CANFAN** (William D. Grant, 11 Burton Rd., Toronto 10, Ontario, Canada: irreg.: 8/\$1) is the eloquent voice of Canadian Fandom, and this time around the elocutioners include Harry Warner, Jr., with a thoughtful analysis of "cosmic" science fiction and Phil Ransch with an equally considered essay on literary elements in the field. Editor Grant contributes a nostalgic reminiscence of the 1951 MidWestCon and some vintage stuff on vintage movies. Fifteen years of publication have made this magazine a dependable source of solid material.

Speaking of not-so-solid material, I'm going to barge in between reviews here to publicly—and reluctantly—state a personal policy for the future.

As of the time this item appears in print, I shall be giving up writing any future material for fanzines. Unfortunately, I've found that the demands of this column, editing **SCIENCE FICTION WORLD** with Tucker, and fulfilling my FAPA requirements between them manage to exhaust my sources of material—and, frequently, exhaust me as well. So with the exception of articles already written and not yet in print, or occasional letters in future, I'm forced

# Letters

## from the Readers

### EYE CATCHER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I thought I ought to drop you a line and let you know what I thought of the August issue.

I like your covers. The August cover caught my eye right away. You might say that MADGE'S covers are eye catchers!

The cartoons were eye catchers too—my only complaint being that you don't use enough of them each issue.

BATTLE OUT OF TIME was a good story. FLIGHT INTO THE UNKNOWN was also good—a good way to waste the ten minutes it took me to read it! No more like this please.

REALTY UNLIMITED was a really good yarn. I would like to sit in on a showing someday of "Ultrarama."

SKID ROW PILOT and THE HOSTILE SURVIVORS were interesting but I am waiting for some of the "Earth contacts aliens" stories that I prefer.

I also like the letter section, but

I wish you'd do away with FAN-DORA'S BOX.

All in all, I think I'll send in my subscription when the next issue appears.

Tim Gilbert  
1481 36th Ave.,  
Oakland, Cal.

*Ok, Tim, here's another issue—  
get that sub in fast! . . . . . wllh*

### WHAT'S MIDWEST?

Dear Bill Hamling:

It's surprising how much having a letter appear in *Madge* made me want to write you again. At any rate, I'm back!

I received a letter from one of *Madge's* Eastern fans before I even knew my own letter had appeared. He seemed quite surprised that you hadn't mentioned the MIDWEST S-F CON.

You know, I'm always surprised when people refer to the area around Chicago as the "mid-west." To people like myself in the Rocky Mountain region it is definitely East. Perhaps the category of mid-

west could be applied when the US was a young country, but I feel that by now we should revamp the category into something more geographically accurate. Especially when referring to a science fiction gathering.

Mrs. Charles A. Wilson  
658 S. 5th.,  
East Brigham City, Utah

*Since the Atlantic Coast is roughly 1000 miles east of Chicago you couldn't accurately call Chicago "East." Since Utah is more than 1000 miles west of Chicago you can't refer to it as "West." Thus if we don't use our present designation you'll have to refer to us as "no man's land."—Come to think of it that would open up the whole territory to "colonization" and maybe we could stake a claim on Chicago's "Loop." Just turned a neat mental profit on that one. Ah, well. ....wlh*

ALL WE SEE IS RAIN!

Dear wlh:

Much encouraged by the fact that my last letter remained for the most part intact, I venture to advance a few more well chosen comments.

I wish to point out a few things in the illo dept. which you may consider compliments. In order of appearance this is the way I rate the illos in the August issue:

1. Cover: a conglomeration of scenes from the story. Good artwork but thumbs down.

2. Page 5: fair . . . Frosty can do better.

3. Page 6 & 7: for a change the lead illo actually depicted a scene from the story. (BATTLE OUT

OF TIME was pretty good.)

4. Page 63: Scheffy should hide in shame.

5. Page 65, 80, 99 & 100: all average.

6. Page 79: Where in the depths of Cygni 61 did Scheffy think up that "Hairy BEM"? Good.

7. Page 107: Kohler did a good job. I like.

8. Page 127: Woltz said a mouthful.

So much for the compliments. As to your editorial on scarcity of water: how long has it been since you looked out the window?

Stories: Lead Novel pretty good but could be better considering Swain wrote it.

THE HOSTILE SURVIVORS just passes. SKID ROW PILOT gives Swain a fight for first place in the issue. REALITY UNLIMITED was well written, but as to plot . . . Silverberg should stand in the corner. FLIGHT INTO THE UNKNOWN leaves me undecided but I tend toward giving it an ok.

Bob Bloch's denunciation of fake BNF'S (Big Name Fans) in FAN-DORA'S BOX is a Pulitzer Prize Winner.

A. Mardis, Jr.  
433 W. Wilson Ave.,  
Bement, Ill.

*Brother, you should have been around here the night of the big rain—we had stayed down at the office to clean up a deadline and when we looked out the window we saw nothing but a sea of water where there once had been a street. To hell with the deadline—we got on a dike bridgade and "sealed" the front door as best we could. Luckily the water stopped right at the threshold else this issue of*

*MADGE* would have come to you  
on water wings .....wlh

## CHALLENGE

Dear Bill Hamling:

I thought Dwight V. Swain's *BATTLE OUT OF TIME* was really good, with a nice get-going beginning and one of the trickiest endings ever. I could read that yarn over and over and still get a thrill out of it!

You know, I didn't think anything would ever be as good as Swain's *BRING BACK MY BRAIN!* in the April issue. And here, with *BATTLE OUT OF TIME* he writes a novel that is twice as good.

Anyway, here, Mr. Swain is a challenge that everybody would like to see you live up to.

Give us something better yet!

James W. Ayers  
609 First St.,  
Attalla, Ala.

*Got news for you, Jim. Dwight's new novel is on our desk right now. Yep, you can start licking your chops—it's that good! We'll schedule it as soon as we can so get ready for another big treat. That boy's a writer! .....wlh*

## COLLECTORS NOTE

Dear Ed:

I recently bought a copy of the August *Madge* and was quite pleased to find such fine science fiction still available. I lost contact with s-f while in service and only now have renewed my old interest. It's sure good to know that s-f magazines such as *Madge* are still so popular. I imagine they will

always be.

You might let other fans know, incidentally, that I no longer have room for my private collection of some 300-400 s-f magazines and books. For anyone interested I'll be happy to send a list of what I have.

Thanks again for making my return to s-f so pleasant.

Dave Prosser  
1533 Euclid Ave.,  
Steubenville, Ohio

*Welcome home, Dave. We're sure we'll keep you just as pleased in forthcoming issues. ....wlh*

## ON BINDING & STUFF

Dear wlh:

I have been reading *Madge* for a couple of years so I thought it was just about time to put my two cents in.

Your featured novels have been fairly good lately, but far too short in length. A few years back the novels were much longer.

I am continually annoyed with your binding. Because there is only one staple the book doesn't open right. Seems to me that two would increase the durability also.

*FANDORA'S BOX* is much more interesting since Bob Bloch took it over. Keep it coming.

*THE COSMIC PEN CLUB* is a complete waste of space and should be replaced. Why not put in a *Personals* Column instead. In regard to the latter, I still am missing the first nine issues of *Madge* in case anyone has them for sale.

Even though I might have sounded critical I still think *Madge* is one of the best s-f magazines published. And to prove it, here's my subscription.

Allan Rast  
741 Myrtle St.,  
Hayward, Cal.

No better way to back up your words, Al. As to the *PEN CLUB*, we've been deluged with requests for listings so guess maybe a lot of readers enjoy the opportunity it affords them to make direct contact with other s-f enthusiasts. Anyone who wants a listing better get the required info in promptly. There's a waiting list developing and we can't devote more space in each issue than we now are doing. On the request you made for back issues, the only one we can still supply is No. 8 as listed on page 129. Our supply of that issue is just about gone—we'll have to remove it from the next issue so order it fast. ....with

## LET'S GET NASTY!

Dear Ed:

I hereby begin a letter about letters. Years ago when I was a little bitty fan with a beany cap I used to read *Startling Stories*. In that mag they had the darndest letter column you ever did see. They had some of the field's best letter hacks. The real obnoxious type.

Every issue the letter hacks would get together and insult the editor's forbears. But nonetheless they had a darn good letter section.

Now *Madge's* letter section is relatively dead. There's just one explanation for it. The letter hacks don't tromp on the mag enough. Makes it dull. If you don't hate the letter writer you're not living.

Personally, I can't find too much wrong with *Madge* but surely someone can. The few regular

hacks you do have aren't hostile and they aren't too regular either. So keep up the bad work, letter hacks. Someday we may still have an interesting letter column in *Madge*.

Milton Stevens  
3989 Beverly Glen Blvd.  
Sherman Oaks, Cal.

We remember the type of letter you're talking about, Milt. Frankly, that pap in *SS* bored the hell out of us. There was no sincere criticism—or for that matter, praise. Just a lot of gobbledegook that some idiot might have (perhaps did) concoct. You express doubt that such letters can be written to us. We agree with you. Our readers, for the most part, write in with a sincere gripe or bunch of orchids. They've got something to say and that's our idea of what a letter column should be. Too, we don't subscribe to this idea of "regulars." No small group of people should monopolize a letter column. That's the same as having no letter column at all. We use the open door policy where everybody has a chance to be heard. We'll even go out of our way to side-track if necessary a letter from a "regular" to include one or more new voices. That, in essence is the only policy we have in conducting the column. We want to hear from everybody, not just a few. ....with

## DEHYDRATED WATER—HUH?

Dear Bill:

Feel like I know you well enough to call you "Bill" now. Some of your personality must soak into your mags. The only other editor I've got to know via his mags is Ray Palmer, who seems like a rela-



tive. There's a difference between you and Ray though. You're an editor, he's a promoter. Always promising something—a n o t h e r Burroughs, hair oil, new magazines, chili sauce, etc. Real enthusiastic.

Enough on Palmer. I wrote to tell you about your editorial in the August issue. "Science Fiction" is right! So we'll have Venus, offering huge oceans of water if our supply of fresh water vanishes. Huh? HUH! In the first place, we don't know for sure whether there's any water on Venus. In the second it would be so full of alien bacteria that every drop would have to be boiled and condensed. Third, even if the first two were overcome it would be well-nigh impossible to transport the water back to Earth. How yuh gonna do it—via space-pipeline? Guess we'll just have to stick to dehydrated water if our supply ever runs out!

Liked the August issue well enough. The letter section was the best in ages. Only thing I really didn't like was the TOMORROW'S SCIENCE feature you ran on the back cover. To me all nebula look alike, with just another name. I've had a sneaking suspicion that you use the same photo all along whenever you use the feature in place of an ad, supplying a different caption.

Have Henry Bott review more books each issue. He isn't given enough space to show what a good reviewer he really is.

BATTLE OUT OF TIME used a time-worn plot. I had to forget previous stories I'd read that were like it.

Roger Ebert  
410 E. Washington

Urbana, Ill.

*We have a sneaking hunch that Ray Palmer will be preening himself like a Jovian glupfhk with your calling him a promoter. Actually, you're very right about Ray. He's one guy who always seems to pop up with ideas—and what's more he always exploits them. The mark of a true promoter. You'll recall the first time the flying saucers hit the big time in a publicity way. Well, Palmer was the guy standing behind the door feeding releases to the press! But don't kid yourself that Ray isn't an editor also. Don't forget he was boss-man of the most successful science fiction magazine in the world during the middle forties. We mean AMAZING STORIES. No magazine ever hit the circulation Ray achieved in those days. Nope. Not even MADGE. But man, we're in there plugging each issue and thus far what we offer seems to please . . . Tut, now. Get your glasses on, son. If you have a fairly good collection of Madge you'll note that we've used many different types of astronomical photos for our back cover. The boys at Mt. Wilson & Palomar will write you nasty letters for accusing them of doctoring their mirror on the 100 inch job! As to dehydrated water, how much is in a glass? . . . wth*

## BARGAIN, HE SAYS

Dear Bill:

I just received my two free books and my first subscription issue of *Madge*, the August issue.

While I don't say the issue was simply great, it won't keep me from reading succeeding ones!

I wanted to let you know that

I like the way your stories combine scientific aspects with action; that makes for a superb story. And before I forget, the cover on August was good—particularly the space ship.

I close, heartily recommending your subscription offer.

Joe Meeks  
1909 Robinson Ave.,  
Portsmouth, Ohio

*We'll second that recommendation, Joe. Come on, gang, send in those subs! Turn the page . . . wth*

**CALL US MINOTAURS!**

Dear Bill Hamling:

Just a satisfied voice of approval for the August issue of *Madge*.

Being stationed in Arabia gives me sufficient time for reflecting on how many other s-f magazines today are far below the high standard of entertainment value set by *Madge*.

Dwight V. Swain's **BATTLE OUT OF TIME** had that good, unbeatable flair, where a hero bravely faces all dangers to come to a victorious climax.

Why couldn't the Minotaur of this story have resulted from the genetical union of alien man and human woman?

A/2C Rudolph Sukenik  
AF21920162

Det. 2, 8th Air Postal Sqdn.  
APO 616, New York, N.Y.

*How do we know it didn't? . . . wth*

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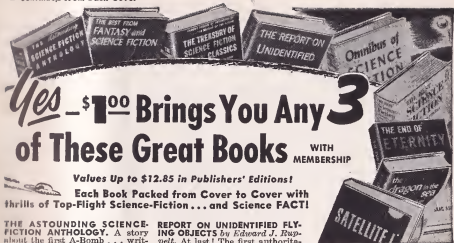
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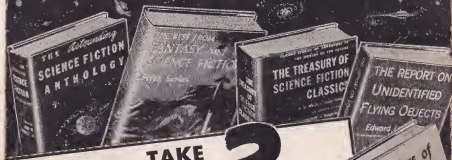
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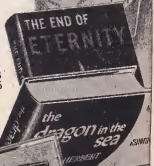


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